

INSTILLING COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS DURING THE ITALIAN  
CAMPAIGN (1943-1945): THE ALLIED EXPERIENCE WITH  
FOLGORE AND FRIULI COMBAT GROUPS

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## ABSTRACT

INSTILLING COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS DURING THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN (1943-1945): THE ALLIED EXPERIENCE WITH FOLGORE AND FRUILI COMBAT GROUPS, by CPT Giovanni Corrado, 177 pages.

Beginning in July 1944, the Allies provided military assistance to the Royal Italian Army in an attempt to raise five combat groups (small division-level units) to expedite the Allied war effort in Italy. The British assumed most of the assistance effort, and implemented an ambitious training program, which aimed to commit effective combat groups to battle in early 1945. The task proved a thorny one. In fact, with the exception of Folgore Combat Group, the Italian combat groups struggled to overcome the legacy of being part of an army that had entered the war unprepared. British trainers failed to understand how the combat groups' different backgrounds in terms of combat experience, training, and organizational culture deeply influenced the achievement of combat effectiveness. This thesis argues that cultural rather than material factors accounted for the relative success or failure of individual combat groups. Furthermore, it concludes that instituting cultural change is an altogether more difficult problem than improving the material conditions of a unit, and that time is a key enabler of success when cultural change proves a necessity. Finally, the thesis analyzes current United States doctrine regarding Security Force Assistance, and points to how understanding the British experience with the Italian combat groups may prove beneficial for Security Force Assistance operations today.

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## ACRONYMS

BLU	British Liaison Unit
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Project Agency
FSF	Foreign Security Forces
ICA	Italian Cobelligerent Army
MMIA	Military Mission Italian Army
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
RAGS	Royal Army General Staff
SFA	Security Force Assistance

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The Italian Campaign was instrumental in influencing the outcome of the Second World War in Europe. Before and during its development, the campaign presented the Allies with some of the most difficult political, strategic, operational, and tactical challenges confronted during the war.

At the political level, two main issues concerned the Allies. First, at the end of the Casablanca conference on 24 January 1943, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill declared a policy of unconditional surrender of the Axis powers.<sup>1</sup> On early August 1943, the unconditional surrender policy proved troublesome when Italian officials approached British diplomats in Lisbon and Tangier to make peace overtures. Since the Italian Government was determined not to accept an unconditional surrender, Allied fears that an insistence on the point might well lead to no surrender at all became all too plausible.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, to avoid such a consequence, the Allies did not report the adjective unconditional in the short-term armistice signed at Cassibile on 3 September 1943. On 8 September 1943, the Allied

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<sup>1</sup>Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Joint Press Conference with Prime Minister Churchill at Casablanca, 24 January 1943” (The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16408> (accessed 10 November 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Winston Churchill, *Closing the Ring* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2002), Adobe Digital Editions, 135.

announcement over United Nations radio dispelled any doubts about the real nature of the armistice:

This is General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces. The Italian Government has surrendered its armed forces unconditionally. As Allied Commander in Chief, I have granted a military armistice, the terms of which have been approved by the Governments of the United Kingdom, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>3</sup>

This announcement was aimed at satisfying both British public opinion, which advocated for unconditional surrender, and the Italian-American electorate supporting Roosevelt which did not see any written clause compelling Italy to an unconditional surrender.<sup>4</sup> During this process, the vision of the Supreme Commander Allied Force General Dwight David Eisenhower of the importance of knocking Italy out of war prevailed. Therefore, the Allies had to avoid humiliating measures that could potentially lead to the tightening of the Italian peace overtures.

In spite of this understanding, after the signature of the short-term<sup>5</sup> armistice in early September 1943, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden introduced again the unconditional surrender of the Italian forces as the first provision of the long

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<sup>3</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate, *Surrender of Italy, Germany, and Japan: World War II. Instruments of Surrender, Public Papers, and Addresses of the President and of the Supreme Commanders*, 79th cong., 1st sess., 4 October 1945, Ibiblio: The Public's Library and Digital Archives, [http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/war.term/093\\_01.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/war.term/093_01.html) (accessed 9 December 2013), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Salvatore Loi, *I Rapporti fra Alleati e Italiani nella Cobelligeranza* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 1986), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup>The short armistice signed in Sicily on 3 September 1943 had only a military nature since it called for the end of the hostilities between Italy and the United Nations. The long armistice signed at Malta on 29 September 1943 included additional political, economic, and financial conditions for the surrender of Italy. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Surrender of Italy, Germany, and Japan World War II*, 12-13.

armistice's initial draft.<sup>6</sup> On 28 September 1943, the pro tempore head of the Italian government Marshal Pietro Badoglio made clear to the British Major General Noel Mason-MacFarlane, in charge of the negotiations for the Allies, that Italy would not accept the humiliating provisions of the long-term armistice.<sup>7</sup> In the final draft of the armistice, eventually signed at Malta on 29 September 1943, the Allies agreed to apply the adjective unconditional to the acceptance of the armistice conditions and not to the military surrender.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Allies perceived knocking Italy out of war as more compelling than satisfying their own public opinions with the imposition of an unconditional surrender.

The second main political point of concern was whether or not to accord the status of cobelligerent to Italy after the signature of the long-term armistice. The question proved a thorny one. How, for example, would cobelligerency reconcile with unconditional surrender? In fact, during the Quadrant Conference in Quebec from 14 to 24 August 1943, the Allies underlined that “these terms [of the short armistice] did not visualize the active assistance of Italy in fighting the Germans.”<sup>9</sup>

The reason behind this straight declaration became clear during the negotiation of the short armistice. On 19 August 1943, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff at the Allied Forces

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<sup>6</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate, *Surrender of Italy, Germany, and Japan World War II*, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>9</sup>Office of the U.S. Secretary of War, Office of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Quadrant Conference August 1943, Papers and Minutes of Meetings, *Ibiblio The Public's Library and Digital Archives*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Dip/Conf/Quadrant/QUADRANT.PDF> (accessed 9 December 2013), 142.

Headquarters, Brigadier General Walter Bedell Smith, informed Brigadier General Giuseppe Castellano, the Italian envoy for the negotiation of the armistice, that “the Allied governments cannot consider Italy as an ally because both the American and British public opinions would oppose such a hypothesis.”<sup>10</sup>

Actually, during the armistice’s negotiations in July and August 1943, the British, more than the Americans, supported the position that Italy would have to capitulate and accept the unconditional surrender.<sup>11</sup> In fact, on 21 September 1943, Churchill passionately defended before the House of Commons the Allies’ decision to grant cobelligerency to Italy. Churchill claimed that the Allied concession would allow the Italian Government to begin the first of a series of acts of self-redemption.<sup>12</sup>

Italy officially gained the status of cobelligerent upon declaring war on Germany on 13 October 1943.<sup>13</sup> Such an achievement was the result of Eisenhower’s efforts, from the fall of Mussolini’s government on, to obtain political support to convert the Italian enemy into a cobelligerent.<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower believed that, in anticipation of a long and

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<sup>10</sup>U.S. Office of Strategic Services, RG226, Diario del Generale Giuseppe Castellano Luglio–Settembre 1943, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.museobadoglio.altervista.org/docs/diario-castellano.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2013), 17.

<sup>11</sup>Loi, 11.

<sup>12</sup>Churchill, 196-200.

<sup>13</sup>Oswaldo Biribicchi, “8 settembre 1943: anatomia di un disastro annunciato e riscossa delle Forze Armate Italiane,” *Il Secondo Risorgimento d’Italia*, no. 4 (28 November 2008): 93, <http://www.secondorisorgimento.it/rivista/sommari/tomo08.04.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg, “Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors,” in *US Army in WWII*, ed. Ricard D. Adamczyk and Morris J. MacGregor

difficult war, the Allies had to exploit all the support the Italians were able to provide. In mid-September 1943, Eisenhower strongly advised General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, to modify the draft long-term armistice clause providing for the disarmament of the Italian units in an attempt to preserve the active collaboration that some Italian units had been providing to the Allies since the armistice. Additionally, General Eisenhower suggested granting Italy the status of cobelligerent in order to reinforce the government's legitimacy and exploit Italian military support.<sup>15</sup>

British and American views on the Italian contribution to war were divergent. In fact, while the Americans were willing to accept Italy's cobelligerent status, some top-level British field commanders obstructed efforts to have Italian forces play a major role in the campaign. The British were concerned that endorsing an effective contribution of the Italian military to the campaign would allow Italy to claim more favorable conditions at the peace settlement at the end of the war.<sup>16</sup> Thus, British General Noel Mason-MacFarlane, chief commissioner of the Allied Control Mission for Italy, advise the Allied Forces Headquarters in Algiers in mid-September 1943 that Italian units should make almost no contribution to Allied operations in Italy.<sup>17</sup>

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(Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1993), <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/civaff/index.htm> (accessed 9 December 2013), 219.

<sup>15</sup>Loi, 24-25.

<sup>16</sup>British Cabinet, paper R11376/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 21 July 1944, in Foreign Office, FO 317-43951 "Italian Army Re-equipment of Three Divisions," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>17</sup>Loi, 23.

Conversely, Italian authorities were determined to participate effectively in the Italian campaign. On 14 September 1943, the Chief of the Italian Army, General Mario Roatta, directed the army staff to reorganize some units to take control of Southern Italy in support of the Allied advance to the north. Therefore, the army staff reorganized and transformed the Ninth Corps into the Fifty-First Corps with internal defense tasks in Northern Apulia. Fifty-First Corps was successful in gaining and maintaining control of the assigned area of responsibility in Brindisi and Bari provinces, even repelling a German attack toward an important ammunition depot between Andria and Corato. Even so, on 22 September 1943 General Mason-MacFarlane ordered the functioning Italian Fifty-First Corps to hand in all its vehicles to the Allies and move back to the rear area.<sup>18</sup>

The aforementioned political challenges arising from the Italian campaign polarized the views of the Allies on the extent of the Italian contribution to expedite the Allied military effort against Nazi Germany. In 1941-1942, the same polarization imbued the discussion among the Allies on the strategic guidance for the conduct of operations against the Axis powers. The Arcadia Conference held on 24 December 1941 in Washington confirmed the Atlantic Ocean and Europe as the decisive theatres. Despite the Japanese attack in Pearl Harbor, Germany was still the prime enemy. Once Germany was defeated, the collapse of Italy and the defeat of Japan would follow.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Loi, 21-25.

<sup>19</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Proceedings of the American-British Joint Chiefs of Staff Conferences Held in Washington, DC on Twelve Occasions between December 24, 1941 and January 14, 1942," Ibiblio: The Public's Library and Digital Archives, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Dip/Conf/Arcadia/ARCADIA.PDF> (accessed 12 November 2013), 95-99, part II, Annex I to JCCs-7, 1-5.

The strategic priority for 1942 was closing and tightening the ring around Germany to complete the blockade of Italy and Germany. The Allies defined the ring as the line running roughly along Archangel–Black Sea–Anatolia–the northern seaboard of the Mediterranean–the western seaboard of Europe. The seizing of the North African coast would open the Mediterranean to convoys, thus shortening the sea routes to the Middle East. Additionally, the Allies concurred with the view that in 1942 no land offensive against Germany, except on the Russian front, would be possible. So they envisaged a series of operations in 1943 in the Mediterranean from Turkey through the Balkans or a landing in Western Europe as a prelude to the final assault on Germany.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the winter of 1941-1942 an attack on Germany through the Italian peninsula was not an option.

Though at the end of the Arcadia Conference the Allies had agreed on the strategic guidance for the war, the strategic imperative at the beginning of 1942 was to assist the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This proved the catalyst for a dissonance between British and American views on how to implement their strategy against Germany. In June 1942, the Allies had to hold a second conference in Washington in order to define how to open a second front to support Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. While the Americans were more willing to strike at Germany's heart through an invasion launched across the English Channel, the British were more enthused about an invasion of France's North African colonies. This concept, codenamed Super-Gymnast and later renamed Torch, worried the Americans due to its demands upon the

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<sup>20</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Proceedings of the American–British Joint Chiefs of Staff Conferences Held in Washington, DC on Twelve Occasions between December 24, 1941 and January 14, 1942," part II, Annex I to JCCs-7, 1-5.

limited Allied stock of shipping and forces that would hamstring the cross-channel operation (Roundup–Bolero). Eventually, the peripheral British approach prevailed and Operation Torch was launched in November 1942.<sup>21</sup>

With Torch and follow-on operations well under way at the end of 1942, the strategic choice was now either to continue along the Mediterranean path or to close down the North-African theatre and concentrate forces for a cross-channel assault. Churchill envisaged a dual strategy for 1943, namely exploiting the opportunity to strike against Italy in the Mediterranean and mounting the cross-channel operation. Once North Africa was secured, the Allies might also exploit offensive opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Dodecanese Islands, and Crete. On the other hand, the Americans considered a cross-channel operation the only viable option once North Africa was secured.<sup>22</sup> With Torch successfully accomplished on 7 May 1943, the Western Allies held another conference, codenamed Trident, in Washington from 12 to 27 May 1943 in order to compose their views and set the strategy for the following two years. During the Trident Conference, the Allies agreed on postponing the cross-channel operation until the spring or summer of 1944 and instead decided to launch Operation Husky to invade Sicily.<sup>23</sup>

At the operational level, the challenges revolved around determining the next step after Operation Husky and the reduced forces available. During the Trident conference,

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<sup>21</sup>Ian Gooderson, *A Hard Way to Make a War: the Italian Campaign in the Second World War* (London: Conway, 2008), 23-27.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 27-31.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

the Allies did not make any decision on the follow-up to Husky. Yet they defined a series of potential courses of action to maintain momentum between Husky and Roundup–Bolero. The alternatives were the conduct of operations against the mainland of Italy, the capture of Sardinia, the assault on Greece from the West, and operations against the Dodecanese.<sup>24</sup>

Among the different alternatives, once Sicily was secured, the Allies supposed that the most advantageous lines of advance would be either northeastwards into the toe and heel of Italy to threaten the Naples-Rome area or northwestwards to Sardinia and Corsica. Between these two lines of advance, the northeastern one would be more continuous and more likely to make Italy to collapse by autumn 1943. Thus the Allies directed General Eisenhower to concentrate more on the planning for the establishment of a lodgment on the toe of Italy and studying alternative plans for operations against the heel of Italy and for the capture of Sardinia.<sup>25</sup> To General Eisenhower, the trigger for the decision would be the outcome of Husky. If the Axis resisted vigorously in Sicily, thereby forecasting high Italian morale, the northeastern line of advance would be preferable. Otherwise, operations on the Italian mainland were more promising.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Office of the U.S. Secretary, Office of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Trident Conference May 1943, Papers and Minutes of Meetings, Ibiblio The Public's Library and Digital Archives, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Dip/Conf/Trident/TRIDENT.PDF> (accessed 13 November 2013), 45-48, 89-90.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Albert N. Garland, and Howard McGaw Smyth, "Sicily and the Surrender of Italy," in *US Army in WWII*, ed. Ricard D. Adamczyk and Morris J. MacGregor (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1993), Ibiblio The Public's Library and Digital Archives, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-MTO-Sicily/USA-MTO-Sicily-14.html> (accessed on 13 November 2013), sub. 4, vol. 2, pt. 1, ch. 14, The Climax, 258-269.

Right after the beginning of the Allied invasion of Sicily on 9 July 1943, General Eisenhower decided the dispute in favor of the northeastern line of advance since the Italians troops stationed in Sicily presented limited resistance to the Allied invasion. On 17 July 1943, Eisenhower cancelled the invasion of Sardinia and discussed with his staff the possibility of a direct amphibious assault on Naples (Operation Gangway). Although Allied air power had limited operational reach to support the landing, the Allied Forces Headquarters' staff made a formal study to identify potential landing sites for the operation.

On 26 July 1943, as a consequence of Mussolini's government fall, the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff directed General Eisenhower to launch Operation Avalanche against the bay of Salerno and the port of Naples at the earliest possible date in order definitively to knock Italy out of war.<sup>27</sup> On 9 September 1943, the Allies launched Operational Avalanche simultaneously with Operation Slapstick, a landing at the port of Taranto in the heel of Italy. Six days earlier, on 3 September 1943, the Allies launched also Operation Baytown to secure the toe of Italy. Eisenhower had to accelerate the execution of the invasion of southern Italy in order to capitalize upon the favorable political conditions that the fall of Mussolini's government had generated. Additionally, he had only two months before four American and three British divisions would be held in readiness for withdrawal from Italy. Therefore, from 1 November 1943 onward,

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<sup>27</sup>Garland and McGaw Smyth, 258.

Eisenhower could rely only on 27 Allied divisions to defeat the increasing German forces in Italy.<sup>28</sup>

Beside the discussed operational considerations, the Italian campaign presented the Allies with an unprecedented challenge at the tactical level. In 1943, the rough geography of Sicily hindered the Allied mechanized formations' ability to maneuver. Terrain was mostly broken by terraced slopes and foothills. Only the plain of Catania on eastern Sicily allowed for some form of mechanized maneuver while the northeastern portion of the island was mostly rough and increasingly mountainous. Additionally, Allied soldiers fought the campaign in summer, and were beset by dry, dusty, and hot conditions. Furthermore malaria and sand-fly fever were also an issue.<sup>29</sup> Although more temperate, the situation did not improve much after advancing onto the Italian peninsula. The Apennine Mountains challenged the Allies with narrow plains along the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic coasts and afforded the enemy excellent defensive terrain. Logistically, very few roads were available to support mechanized formations.<sup>30</sup> For example, on 15 November 1943, weather and supply problems actually defeated Allied efforts to breach the so-called *Bernhardt* line south of Rome. Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commander of the U.S. Fifth Army, was forced to pull his forward units off the mountain slopes on Monte Camino, Monte La Difensa, and Monte Rotondo because of the

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<sup>28</sup>Office of the U.S. Secretary of War, Office of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Trident Conference May 1943, 90.

<sup>29</sup>Gooderson, 102.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 225.

impossibility of supplying them, and many troops suffered horribly from the damp, cold conditions.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, a multiplicity of issues shaped the way in which the Italian campaign was planned and executed. While the Allies could envision the clear end state of knocking Italy out of the war and compelling Germany to commit more forces to protect its southern flank, the operational approach to the campaign was defined on an *ad hoc* basis. In fact, the evolving situation in other theaters of operations required the Allies to review continuously their approach to the Italian campaign. The lack of continuity in the Allied attitude towards Italy frustrated Italian authorities, who now wished to avoid humiliation and were committed to contributing to the liberation of Italy from the Nazis with Italian blood.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, from as early as the first official contacts that led to the armistice, the Italian Government asked the Allies to allow Italy to play a prominent role in the Italian campaign. Despite this commitment on the part of the Italian leadership, Italian military and civilian morale in mid-1943 was low. The armistice of Cassibile on 3 September 1943 brought about a deep rift within the Italian Royal Army. In the aftermath of the armistice, some units remained loyal to Benito Mussolini and formed the National Republican Army, opposing the Allied advance to north until May 1945. The Germans, often forcibly, disarmed other Italian units that did not comply with their request to continue the fight against the Allies. Still others accepted the conditions set in the

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<sup>31</sup>Gooderson, 237.

<sup>32</sup>Loi, 25.

armistice and surrendered to the Allies, later forming the core of the Italian Cobelligerent Army (ICA).

The rough period that the Italian Royal Army had been experiencing from 1939 to 1943 in terms of military effectiveness and morale aggravated this rift. Italy had entered the Second World War with trepidation and finished it in humiliation.<sup>33</sup> In between, Italian armed forces were able to achieve only limited tactical successes with the few available elite forces and relied on German assistance to end the Balkan campaign and save Italian dominion in North Africa. In the Soviet Union, the Red Army's counteroffensive at Stalingrad destroyed the Italian forces in Russia in the winter of 1942-1943. By the spring of 1943, even German help was no longer enough to reverse the outcome of a disastrous war.<sup>34</sup>

The causes of the fiasco were unsuitable doctrine, training, tactics, and equipment, and the inability to learn from the previous defeats.<sup>35</sup> Mussolini assumed that Italy's eight million bayonets, reinforced by fascist spirit, were her strength. As a result, the dominating tactical principle was the concentration of the greatest possible mass for every task, relying solely on weight of numbers to clear the way. If stalled, Italian units attempted to regain impetus by committing reserves frontally, which often served to reinforce failure.<sup>36</sup> In this approach, training was of little importance. In fact, the army's

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<sup>33</sup>Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *Military Effectiveness Volume III: The Second World War* (Boston, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 136.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Williamson Murray, "German Response to Victory in Poland: A Case Study in Professionalism," *Armed Forces and Society* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 285-298.

<sup>36</sup>Millett and Murray, 162.

higher leadership did not discover the connection between training and military performance until 1941 since the widespread assumption had been that intuition and personal valor counted for more than training in battle.<sup>37</sup>

Equally important, Italy entered the Second World War with a First World War force structure.<sup>38</sup> In the Italian army of 1939–1943, there was little room for mechanization since Italy's generals assumed that infantry and artillery alone could do jobs that also required tanks.<sup>39</sup> As per doctrine, tanks could not substitute for infantry and, when employed as penetration force, had to be followed very closely by infantry formations. Thus, the tanks' limited role was to save time and reduce casualties in infantry formations while, like in the First World War, the infantry and artillery alone dominated rigid Italian maneuver.<sup>40</sup>

An additional point of ineffectiveness in the Italian army of 1939-1943 was that the officer corps lacked mutual trust.<sup>41</sup> At the company level, the lack of trust between officers and enlisted men mirrored the lack of trust within the higher officer corps. The caste mentality of the officer corps precluded, and was designed to preclude, the

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<sup>37</sup>MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

<sup>38</sup>Millett and Murray, 171.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>40</sup>Emilio Bonaiti, "Gli Ordinamenti e la Dottrina del Regio Esercito negli Anni Venti," IT.CULTURA.STORIA.MILITARE (ICSM), <http://www.icsm.it/articoli/ri/ordinamentore.html> (accessed 28 November 2013).

<sup>41</sup>Millett and Murray, 171.

development of trust with the lower orders.<sup>42</sup> In fact, officers experienced much better living conditions than Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) and conscripts. Officers had better uniforms and equipment, personal servants to assist them in daily activities, better food and drinks, and could enjoy more leave.<sup>43</sup> Such a situation hampered the raising within Italian units sufficient *esprit de corps*, a prerequisite for combat effectiveness.

At the same time, the Italian capability to support an expeditionary army remained very limited for the period between 1939 and 1943. In fact, during most of the Second World War Italian combat units suffered regular shortages of fuel, food, water, ammunition, vehicles, weapons, and even manpower.<sup>44</sup> The troops' rations contained fewer calories than the Italian rations of the First World War and were inferior in quality and quantity compared to the rations of either their enemies or allies. Even medical care was very limited and clothing was almost unusable. In fact, some units received boots that dissolved in mud and snow while enlisted uniforms fell apart.<sup>45</sup> Under these circumstances, it was quite ambitious to embark upon an imperialistic foreign policy with an army totally unprepared for war and unable to sustain its units on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite the overall inadequacy of Italian military power, other motivations residing in the social environment contributed even more to the often dismal Italian performance during the Second World War. For the vast majority of Italians, the war of

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<sup>42</sup>Millett and Murray, 164.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 162-172.

<sup>45</sup>Knox, 154-157.

1940-1943 was “a war not felt” and therefore lethargically fought.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, a general war-weariness characterized Italian society during the first three years of war. This increased exponentially after the Axis defeat in North Africa in May 1943.<sup>47</sup> By the beginning of August 1943, the British ambassador in Lisbon reported to Churchill that “the whole of Italy is longing for peace, and above all to be rid of the Germans, who are universally execrated.”<sup>48</sup>

The reality was that most of the Italians were tired of both Mussolini’s regime and his German ally. A private conversation between King Emmanuel Victor the Third and Mussolini right before the latter’s fall characterized the Italian situation well: “My dear *Duce*, it’s no longer any good. Italy has gone to bits. Army morale is at rock bottom. The soldiers don’t want to fight any more . . . At this moment you are the most hated man in Italy.”<sup>49</sup> In July 1943, Mussolini’s regime was over and Italy sought for a way to conclude the war.

The unstable Italian political situation ensured that the Allies did not bring the Italians in quickly as cobelligerents. As a consequence, the initial contribution of the ICA to the Italian Campaign was limited to the First Motorized Combat Group and F Recce Squadron. On 20 December 1943, the Allies accepted in principle a wider participation of Italian troops in the ongoing operations, provided that those units were equipped and trained to an Anglo-American standard.

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<sup>46</sup>Knox, 169.

<sup>47</sup>Gooderson, 151.

<sup>48</sup>Churchill, 132.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

Despite this agreement, it was not until 23 July 1944 that the Allies gave their formal consent to the formation of two Italian combat groups<sup>50</sup> equipped with British weaponry and vehicles. Italian officers belonging to the combat groups had to participate in “train-the- trainers”<sup>51</sup> courses held at British military schools. At the same time, British field manuals were translated into Italian and distributed within the two combat groups. Additionally, each combat group had a British Liaison Unit (BLU) assigned, consisting of a team of British officers tasked with instructing and liaising with the Italian units.

On 31 July 1944, the Allies requested Italian military authorities to create a total of six combat groups: Legnano, Folgore, Cremona, Friuli, Mantova and Piceno. Later, Piceno Combat Group became a training unit for reserve forces and only five combat groups were trained and equipped as combat units. Moreover, Italian authorities were to create five Internal Security Divisions to be possibly employed as combat units if the situation so dictated.<sup>52</sup> The Internal Security Divisions’ main initial task was infrastructure defense and counter-airborne operations while they subsequently performed minefield clearance and public order missions. Italian military authorities created only three out of the five authorized Internal Security Divisions (Aosta, Calabria,

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<sup>50</sup>Small division-level units consisting of two infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, one engineer battalion, and combat service support units.

<sup>51</sup>Professional courses aimed at providing a group of designated instructors with the competencies to mentor and train effectively other groups of instructors.

<sup>52</sup>Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno (1944–1945)*, 2nd ed. (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, 2010), 13-34.

and Reggio), which reported exclusively to the Italian Army General Staff.<sup>53</sup> This was a point of difference with the combat groups, since the Allied Armies in Italy<sup>54</sup> retained their operational command while employed in operations.

In spite of the Italian request, the Allies did not authorize the raising of an Italian corps-level headquarters, thus combat groups were attached to different Allied frontline units.<sup>55</sup> Legnano Combat Group was attached to U.S. Second Corps; Folgore Combat Group to British Thirteenth Corps; Cremona Combat Group to British Fifth Corps; Friuli Combat Group to British Tenth Corps; and Mantova Combat Group to British Eighth Army. Actually Mantova Combat Group did not come into combat due to the surrender of German forces in Italy in May 1945.

Among the reasons in favor of a major involvement of Italian units in the Italian Campaign, there were the positive results achieved by those Italian units already fighting in support of the Allies, the previously mentioned First Motorized Combat Group (lately transformed into the Italian Liberation Corps) and F Recce Squadron. This consisted of paratroops from the Third and Eleventh Battalions of 185th Airborne Regiment/184th Airborne Division Nembo who, following the Armistice on 8 September 1943, choose to

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<sup>53</sup>Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito Italiano, Le Divisioni Sicurezza Interna Calabria, Reggio, Aosta, [http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia\\_esercito/19461947/DivisioneSicurezzaInternaCalabria/Pagine/default.aspx](http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia_esercito/19461947/DivisioneSicurezzaInternaCalabria/Pagine/default.aspx); [http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Organizzazione/Organizzazione%20Centrale/Comando%20delle%20Forze%20Operative%20Terrestri/2\\_fod/br\\_aosta/Pagine/default.aspx](http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Organizzazione/Organizzazione%20Centrale/Comando%20delle%20Forze%20Operative%20Terrestri/2_fod/br_aosta/Pagine/default.aspx); [http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia\\_esercito/19461947/DivisioneSicurezzaInternaReggio/Pagine/default.aspx](http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia_esercito/19461947/DivisioneSicurezzaInternaReggio/Pagine/default.aspx) (accessed 9 December 2013).

<sup>54</sup>It was the highest Allied headquarters in Italy after its transformation from the Fifteenth Army Group.

<sup>55</sup>Crapanzano, 15.

form a regular military unit with its own administrative staff under the British Thirteenth Corps. This unit took part in the Battles of Monte Cassino (March 1944), Florence (August 1944), Operation *Herring* (April 1945) and contributed to the liberation of many villages in Central and Northern Italy.

In addition to F Recce Squadron, the combat groups gave a significant contribution to the Allied effort in Italy, playing an important role in the fighting and the liberation of large portions of territory in Central and Northern Italy. Cremona Combat Group was the first unit to breach the Gothic Line, while Friuli and Legnano Combat Groups rid Bologna of German troops.<sup>56</sup> Folgore Combat Group, after winning many tactical engagements and taking part in Operation *Herring*, pursued the German troops through the Po Valley and up to the Adige Valley.

The Italian Campaign made a major contribution to final victory in Second World War. Different sources describe it as either “a hard way to make a war” or “the long hard slog.”<sup>57</sup> The multiplicity and complexity of challenges prevented the Allies from having a clear long-term path to follow. In addition, Italian authorities put pressure on the Allies to allow a major involvement in military operations. Considering the degraded military effectiveness of the Italian Royal Army, the Allies had to launch a comprehensive program to raise military units capable of effectively contributing to the war effort. After their creation, the Italian combat groups took an active part in the last portion of the Italian campaign, relieving Allied combat power that was diverted to northwestern and southern Europe for the final attack on Germany’s heart.

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<sup>56</sup>Crapanzano, 3.

<sup>57</sup>See bibliography.

### Purpose and Scope

The primary focus of this thesis is the military assistance provided by the Allies to reorganize, train, and equip some units of the Italian Royal Army in order to create a military force able to contribute to the fight. Furthermore, the purpose and scope of the study is to investigate to what extent the support provided by the Allies during the Italian Campaign was successful in instilling combat effectiveness in the ICA.

Unquestionably, the military assistance provided by the Allies to the newly freed countries during Second World War is only an early example of what U.S. joint and army doctrine today defines as Security Force Assistance (SFA). Indeed, this activity is not a discrete and isolated historical event relegated to a specific period, but experienced a continuous development and application from the Second World War to the present.

After the Second World War, from 1945 to 1989 the Iron Curtain divided the world into the Eastern and Western Blocs, both with the capability of mutual assured destruction. Although a balance of power mitigated against a direct military confrontation between the two Blocs, indirect military confrontations were common, namely through proxy wars around the globe (Korea, Vietnam, Middle East, Afghanistan). Within this context, the military support provided to satellite states aligned with the Western Bloc became of paramount importance to counter both the influence and the interference of the Eastern Bloc.

Perpetual, low-level conflict characterizes the international stage in the aftermath of Cold War. Non-state actors exploit conditions of degraded security in failing states to build safe heavens and perpetrate terrorist attacks around the globe. The support given to partner states to build the capacity to counter specific threats is now an even more

important part of the U.S. *National Security Strategy*.<sup>58</sup> SFA is now considered to be integral to successful Foreign Internal Defense, counterinsurgency, and stability operations. It includes organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising various components of security forces in support of a legitimate authority.<sup>59</sup>

So, whilst in the past SFA was an additional duty for the U.S. Army and its partners, during the Global War on Terrorism it has become a core competency.<sup>60</sup> Given the relevance of the matter for the planning and execution of contemporary military operations, the study is significant potentially to develop new concepts to drive the development of doctrine on SFA.

### Thesis Development

The thesis logically and chronologically examines the struggle of the Italian Campaign from the Italian and Allied perspectives in order to provide the historical background that led to the raising of the ICA. The bulk of the study relies on primary sources held at the Italian Army General Staff and at the UNITED KINGDOM National Archives. The focal point of the thesis will be on the combat effectiveness of Folgore and Friuli Combat Groups, two units of the ICA characterized by the disparateness of their training and combat background.

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<sup>58</sup>U.S. President, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2010), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf) (accessed 12 September 2013), 21.

<sup>59</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 5 October 2009), I-11.

<sup>60</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-07.1, *Security Force Assistance* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1 May 2009), foreword.

The glory of the Italian airborne troops during Second World War is bound to the North-African campaign from late July to November 1942. As a matter of fact, Folgore airborne division represented an exception to the general lack of military effectiveness within the Italian Royal Army. The brief but supremely professional resistance at El Alamein demonstrated that no ground Italian unit in the Second World War entered combat as well-prepared. Indeed, one could claim that Folgore was as competent as corresponding units in the British or U.S. armies.<sup>61</sup> Although only a few hundred out of 5,000 Italian paratroopers survived El Alamein, Folgore's spirit gave life to Nembo, the second Italian Airborne division.

During the study, Folgore Combat Group is compared with Friuli Combat Group, a more conventional unit originating from the Twentieth Infantry Division Friuli. Friuli was, then, a regular Italian Royal Army unit, as opposed to the elite status of Folgore. This unit, set up in 1939, was deployed to Yugoslavia in 1941 under the Italian Sixth Army Corps. It sustained operations in Yugoslavia for less than a month before being redeployed to Italy and later to Corsica. Here, after the armistice and until 4 October 1943, Friuli fought against the Germans. Later, it moved to Sardinia and eventually to Naples, where in mid-July 1944 it was transformed into Friuli Combat Group.

These units are compared in order to assess if and how their different backgrounds affected the instillation of combat effectiveness in newly formed units. They are substantially evaluated under the same conditions since Folgore Combat Group came into combat only 20 days later than Friuli Combat Group. Additionally, in spite of being

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<sup>61</sup>Knox, 144-145.

assigned to two different British corps, they shared the same battlefield during the Allies' final offensive in the spring of 1945.

Chapter 2 of the thesis examines the status of the Royal Italian Army in 1943 in order to assess morale, organization and combat effectiveness. The analysis will be extended to the interwar period in order to investigate the root causes of the Italian military unpreparedness for war in 1939.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the analysis of the effects of the armistice on the Italian Royal Army in terms of morale, organization, and equipment. Afterward, the investigation shifts to the reasons why the Allies authorized the raising of the ICA after initial opposition to the idea and what Allied support was in terms of organization, training, and equipment.

Chapter 4 defines the methodology to assess the combat effectiveness of Friuli and Folgore Combat Groups and analyzes the combat groups' performance during the Italian Campaign. Such analysis is instrumental in assessing to what extent the Allied military assistance was able to instill combat effectiveness in the ICA.

Chapter 5 examines the main findings of the case study through the lens of current U.S. Army and joint doctrine on SFA in order to understand the implications of the findings for it.

## CHAPTER 2

### STATUS OF THE ITALIAN ROYAL ARMY BEFORE THE ARMISTICE

You know, if only we could combine Italian fighting guts with the backing of British money, we could sweep through Europe.

— Italian Colonel addressing concerns of British exchange officer about age and inadequacy of Italian equipment, Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts*

#### An Army Not Ready for War: Contested Points of View and Rational Causes

The popular view of the Italian character is that it is not a warlike one.

Furthermore, ethnic jokes about supposed Italian cowardice and more aggressive and courageous attitude of the German allies often makes it difficult to estimate clearly the overall performance of the Italian Royal Army during the Second World War. In fact, Italian units that, on the eve of the war, were provided with sufficient training, equipment, and resources, fought as bravely as any other German or Allied units. Other Italian units, in which poor officership and lack of training significantly hampered the creation of a strong *esprit de corps*, collapsed after the first contact with the enemy since they possessed no cause to fight for. Despite this other side of the coin, the general view of the Royal Italian Army during the Second World War, and one still prevalent today, is one of cowardice, provincialism, and incompetence. These assertions reflect negatively on the performance of the Italian Royal Army by implying that collapse and mass desertion was common to all units, thus making it difficult to assess objectively the military effectiveness of the Italian units during the Second World War.

The Allied propaganda campaign during 1939-1943 heavily influenced the creation of a fictitious image of the Italian army, emphasizing tactical Allied victories

while overlooking important defeats suffered against Italian formations. On 8 January 1941, the image of a few Australian soldiers smoking cigarettes and “herding” the flood of Italian prisoners of war captured during the battle of Bardia in Libya stunned the world.<sup>62</sup> Yet few remember the disbandment of the British Second Armored Division after that Italian forces captured it at Mechili, Libya, in April 1941.

Unwarranted criticism often expressed by the German allies contributed greatly to the misconception of the Italian military performance during the Second World War. The Germans blamed Allied access to secret information on Italian poor radio discipline and unreliable ciphers, never suspecting that their own ultra-sophisticated Enigma ciphers were the origin of the information leak.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, many times *Generalleutnant* Erwin Rommel claimed that his Axis forces in North Africa in 1941-1942 lacked sufficient supplies due to the Italian inability to provide transport across the Mediterranean.<sup>64</sup> Yet the Italian navy and air force were able to effectively deliver more than 90 percent of the supplies directed to Axis forces in North Africa.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>World War II Today, “8 January 1941. Australians Herd their Italian Prisoners,” <http://ww2today.com/8th-january-1941-australians-herd-their-italian-prisoners> (accessed 29 November 2013).

<sup>63</sup>Walker, 57.

<sup>64</sup>Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B. H. Liddell-Hart (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 287-290.

<sup>65</sup>Walker, 58.



Figure 1. A Few Guards Escort the Masses of Italian Prisoners of War from Bardia into Captivity, 8 January 1941

*Source:* World War II Today, “8 January 1941. Australians Herd their Italian Prisoners,” <http://ww2today.com/8th-january-1941-australians-herd-their-italian-prisoners> (accessed 29 November 2013).

Still it is indisputable that in 1939 the Italian Royal Armed Forces were not fully ready to face a lengthy global war. Such unpreparedness might seem surprising since in 1940 the Italian armed forces experienced more recent combat operations than any force in Europe, having participated in the Ethiopian war in 1935-1936, the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939, and the invasion of Albania and Greece from 1939-1943. Italian military leadership dutifully reported through the chain of command many of the shortcomings that the armed forces were experiencing during combat operations, yet the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini either dismissed them or assumed they were being corrected.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Allan R. Millett, *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II*, ed. Williamson Murray (New York: Free Press, 1992), 107-108.

Due to an inability to inculcate lessons learned from the experience of the military commitment between 1935 and 1939, Italy was not able to achieve the required level of combat effectiveness necessary to act as an independent military power in wartime. German military support was necessary for the conduct of the so-called Italian “parallel war” from June to December 1940 in France, Greece, and Northern Africa. Such support was even more necessary during the “subaltern war” that Italy fought under German guidance from January 1941 to September 1943 in the Balkans, Russia, and the Mediterranean.<sup>67</sup>

Mussolini chose to ignore warnings of the limitations and unpreparedness of the *Regio Esercito* (Royal Army). When in October 1936 General Federico Baistrocchi, Chief of Staff of the army, told Mussolini that the armament’s transfer to the Spanish Nationalists was hampering the Italian army’s preparation for a war in Europe, Mussolini rewarded Baistrocchi’s candor by replacing him with General Alberto Pariani.<sup>68</sup> What mitigated Mussolini’s anxiety about the military unpreparedness was the certainty that he could avoid a major involvement in the war until 1943 and that his political genius and willpower could overcome any obstacle.<sup>69</sup>

When in 1939 Mussolini realized that the Italian army was far from being ready for war, he designated the navy as the main effort in his initial war plans, supported by the air force. The *in extremis* role assigned to the army would be a penetration in the Alps

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<sup>67</sup>Millett and Murray, 136.

<sup>68</sup>Walker, 105.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

only in case of an imminent French capitulation.<sup>70</sup> No matter the desperate military situation, Mussolini claimed that Italy had to take part in the war to gain access to the oceans so as not to be strangled in the Mediterranean.<sup>71</sup> The desired outcome of Mussolini's war was "some thousands of casualties in order to seat to the negotiation table as a former belligerent."<sup>72</sup> If this was the case, it is clear why the army's readiness for war was not his main concern.

After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the status of the Italian *Forze Armate* (Armed Forces) was not encouraging. In October 1939, General Pariani, declared that the army could field 38 combat-ready divisions while the Chief of Staff of the Royal Air Force, General Giuseppe Valle, asserted that the air force had some 8,500 combat-ready aircraft. The actual figures briefed only a month later to the Chief of the Supreme Command, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, revealed that the army could rely only on 10 effective two-infantry-regiments (binary) divisions and the air force could field about 1,800 combat-ready aircraft, of which only 850 could be considered modern. Thus, Marshall Badoglio evaluated that the military needed an additional 24 to 30 months of hard work to be considered combat ready.<sup>73</sup>

The root causes of the unpreparedness must be put in context and investigated in the interwar period. In fact, blaming the poor performance of the Italian army during the

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<sup>70</sup>Millett, 126.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>72</sup>Rai Scuola, "Mussolini: Preparazione alla Guerra," Rai and Scuola Universita, <http://www.raiscuola.rai.it/articoli/benito-mussolini-la-preparazione-alla-guerra/5384/default.aspx> (accessed 28 November 2013).

<sup>73</sup>Millett, 118.

Second World War on the lack Italian of warrior spirit reflects a superficial view of the problem. The American historian Williamson Murray gives a broader perspective of the problem by identifying its causes in the obsolete equipment, unsuitable doctrine, neglect for training, and the inability to learn from previous defeats.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, he recognized that tactics were inadequate to the new style warfare, and the officer corps was short on mutual trust.<sup>75</sup>

The first factor to consider is that Italy's army started its mechanization process later than other European powers. In the 1920s, Italy had been focused on the defense of the Alpine frontiers since it still saw its most likely opponents as Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, or France. The broken and restrictive terrain of the Alps hampered the possibilities for mobile warfare and the limited armor units' role primarily to infantry support. The more aggressive foreign posture of the 1930s foresaw a possible offensive employment of the *Forze Armate* against other states to maintain the balance of power in Europe. Thus, the Italian military initiated a process of modernization to update its First World War doctrine, develop and field new equipment to replace outdated versions.<sup>76</sup>

The political, social and economic context in which the modernization process occurred hampered the full development of a military instrument equal to the most advanced European armies. Mussolini tended to disregard the importance of material factors to success in war and insisted that fascist spirit could overcome even the most

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<sup>74</sup>Murray, 285-298.

<sup>75</sup>Millett and Murray, 162-163.

<sup>76</sup>Walker, 32-33.

challenging impediments.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, he promoted the eight million bayonets policy, in which enemy resistance would be defeated, not through a modern mechanized force, but through waves of infantry battalions. Such a position did not envision an evolution of Italian tactics towards the modern concept of combined arms warfare and reflected a First World War vision of the military thought, in which will, spirit, and numbers of infantry divisions would be instrumental for success in an attritional war.

In fact, the infantry-centric vision of maneuver on the battlefield permeated the *General Directives for the Employment of High-Echelon Units*, the doctrine promulgated in 1928 to regulate the employment of corps-level units. The directives particularly stressed the preference of the offense over the defense. Defense was to be a temporary and local approach, based on fires and counterattack and executed with an offensive mindset. Even if firepower and maneuver were instrumental for success in battle, infantry's action was the most decisive pillar of success. Infantry imbued with a warrior spirit could overcome any more technologically advanced enemy. This premise was the corollary of the fascist myth of "flesh versus steel."<sup>78</sup>

The directives underlined that the main effort during an offensive engagement had to be directed against the enemy flank to open a breach and then exploitation in depth to disorganize the enemy artillery. In doing this, the doctrine assigned tank units a marginal role. In no case could tanks replace infantry, though they could foster surprise and speed in maneuvering. Tanks could be employed only in favorable terrain and against an enemy organized in hasty defense, but infantry had to follow at a close distance. The 1928

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<sup>77</sup>Millett, 101.

<sup>78</sup>Bonaiti.

doctrine particularly emphasized the restrictions in employing tanks, since they had limited resistance and reach, and required a lot of maintenance and sustainment.<sup>79</sup>

Even army aviation, at that time separated from the air force, played a limited role. Its main tasks were reconnaissance, airlift, and battlefield observation. If requested to perform close air support operations, the targets had to be high pay-off, vulnerable and of substantial size. In fact, technical limitations prevented army aviation from bombing objectives with acceptable precision because small-dimension targets would increase the risk of jeopardizing friendly troops.<sup>80</sup>

Within this First World War-like environment, fascist spirit was not the only reason to emphasize the modest impact of technological advances on the outcome of the war. Economic constraints did not allow Italy to undertake a major and substantial modernization program of the armed forces. Additionally, limited financial resources caused the *Regio Esercito* to receive fewer resources than the navy or air force. In fact, the army establishment stressed the necessity of renovating the artillery, equipment, and weapons even before the Ethiopian war in 1935-1936. Despite this, in 1936 Mussolini made it clear to Lieutenant General Pariani that the army's needs would not be filled until mid-1938 since the needs of the navy and air force were more compelling.<sup>81</sup>

The main hindrance to the Italian war industry was the dearth of raw materials and too small an industrial base. Beside this, the Italians possessed no local source for key raw materials such as iron ore, oil or rubber. While in 1940 Britain was able to access

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<sup>79</sup>Bonaiti.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Millett, 108.

from Southeast Asia 224 million tons of coal, 11.9 million tons of crude oil, 17.7 million tons of iron ore and 13 million tons of steel; Italy had access only to 4.4 million tons of coal, 0.01 million tons of crude oil, 1.2 million tons of iron ore and 2.1 million tons of steel.<sup>82</sup> The only remunerative way that Italy had to obtain hard currency before 1939 was arms sales abroad but, after September 1939, this did not provide enough foreign exchange.<sup>83</sup>

Additionally, in spite of her limited industrial capabilities, Italy had to produce more naval as well as land and air weaponry than the Germans. Since Germany relied on the Italian navy to escort convoys to North Africa, it could concentrate her own naval production on submarines and converted merchantmen. Conversely, the Italians had to manufacture merchantmen, raiders, escort craft and larger vessels in order to counter the British navy in the Mediterranean.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Walker, 12.

<sup>83</sup>Millett, 121.

<sup>84</sup>James T. Sadkovich, "Understanding War: Reapprising Italy's Role in WWII," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (January 1989): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/260699?uid=3739744&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21103004418983> (accessed 16 November 2013).



Figure 2. Mussolini in Libya Perplexingly Examines the Small 47/32 Antitank Gun, North Africa, 1942

*Source: Arena, L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-45: Retroscena Tecnico Della Disfatta* (Parma, Italy: E. Albertelli, 1997), 164. Also the surrounding people's expressions reveal skepticism about the potential of the weapon.

Furthermore, due to an insufficient number of qualified engineers, Italy's industrial system and armed forces lacked of the technical talent to operate and maintain complex machinery. To worsen the situation, the industrial lobby did not refrain from abusing the almost failing coffers of the state through illegal actions and a monopolistic posture on the market.<sup>85</sup> The industrial ruling class was able to dictate both quantity and quality of the equipment that the armed forces had to acquire through political pressure and the social blackmail of mass dismissals. In this context, the executive power was not willing to impose its policy upon the industrial sector, hampering the Italian war effort.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Knox, 28-30.

<sup>86</sup>Nino Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945: Retroscena Tecnico Della Disfatta* (Parma, Italy: E. Albertelli, 1997), 65-66.

German assessments of the Italian economy of war claim that the Italian war industry between 1939 and 1949 exploited only 65 per cent of its potential due to an irrational organization and lack of organizational vision.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, until 1941-1942 Italy was not able to produce more than 65 artillery pieces of caliber greater than 70 millimeters each month, thus hampering the rearmament process that began in 1939. After 1941-1942, Italy reached its peak of industrial capability, producing 250-300 artillery pieces a month. In comparison, during the same timeframe, France produced 600 pieces a month, and Germany 1,000.<sup>88</sup> As a consequence of the aforementioned reasons, Italy fought a *guerra dei poveri* (war of poverty), in which the lack of sufficient and adequate equipment was a major cause of the defeat suffered.<sup>89</sup>

As an additional factor, budgetary and fuel constraints limited the systematic execution of training, which consisted mainly of marching and drill. Many soldiers actually employed their weapons for the first time and received much of their training while at the front, when it was already too late for most of them.<sup>90</sup> As an example of the acquisition of combat skills directly on battlefield, only a handful of Italian tank hunters were prepared to attack and destroy enemy tanks. Most of them had to learn on the battlefield how to neutralize a Sherman tank using improvised Molotov cocktails,<sup>91</sup> thus mitigating through improvisation the lack of training and adequate equipment.

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<sup>87</sup>Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 85.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>89</sup>Sadkovich, 35.

<sup>90</sup>Walker, 23.

<sup>91</sup>Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 34.

Furthermore, large-unit exercises were uncommon and limited to few annual maneuvers. Consequently, many officers, NCOs and soldiers did not have suitable training experience before their employment on the battlefield.<sup>92</sup> Other than material factors, the American professor of international history MacGregor Knox asserts that the army's higher leadership did not discover the connection between training and military performance until 1941. In fact, many officers assumed that valor and intuition in battle were more instrumental to victory than training.<sup>93</sup>

Beside the economic and political constraints that hampered the overall performance of the Italian army during the Second World War, a conservative military establishment limited the exploitation of the interwar opportunity to build an efficient army with an actionable doctrine.<sup>94</sup> The *Regio Esercito* retained most of its older senior officers who had fought during the First World War to fill new command positions arising from the surge in the number of divisions in 1938-1939. Therefore, the Italian army became less attractive for potential young ambitious officers, which contributed to a lack of the essential effectiveness-enhancing factor of experienced and innovative junior officers and NCOs.<sup>95</sup>

The senior officer corps was rife with rivalries and antagonism. When the higher commands attempted to use antagonism between two field commanders to enhance performance in fighting a common enemy, often the two rivals were more focused on

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<sup>92</sup>Walker, 23.

<sup>93</sup>Knox, 144.

<sup>94</sup>Bonaiti.

<sup>95</sup>Walker, 24.

hindering the other than fighting the enemy itself.<sup>96</sup> The situation worsened after 1935, when the adulation for Mussolini within the National Fascist Party also increased within military and governmental organizations. As a result of the widespread flattery bestowed on Mussolini for fear of dismissal and hope for reward, Mussolini himself was no longer able to obtain objective assessments of the military situation.<sup>97</sup>

Additionally, junior officers were poorly trained and commissioned after only attending induction courses that the higher commands themselves assessed as useless.<sup>98</sup> The only actual screening criteria to join the army was physical fitness and, once recruited, in many cases junior officers were more attracted to bureaucratic functions than direct leadership. In most cases, senior and junior leaders shared a caste mentality that hampered the creation of solid units through vertical and horizontal relationships of trust. As a sign of distinction and prestige, officers enjoyed more leave, better food, drink, uniforms and equipment than NCOs and enlistees.<sup>99</sup>

Such a dire military situation did not affect Mussolini's strategic deliberations. In Mussolini's view, Italy had to take part into the Second World War to gain access to the oceans,<sup>100</sup> even if this meant joining an unnatural alliance with Germany.<sup>101</sup> After the

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<sup>96</sup>Millett and Murray, 171-172.

<sup>97</sup>Millett, 100.

<sup>98</sup>Knox, 145-147.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Millett, 112.

<sup>101</sup>William Munday, "Italians' Will to Fight. Inconsistencies in the Field. Army Trained for Short War," *The Sidney Morning Herald*, 30 June 1943,

German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Mussolini directed General Pariani to mobilize and prepare the army for war. Pariani's aim was to acquire small arms, uniforms and supplies to field 2.5 million soldiers in 64 divisions by May 1940. With an improvement in industrial production, the number of divisions would be increased to 126 by 1942.<sup>102</sup>

In November 1939, the General Commissariat for War Production dropped these optimistic predictions claiming that, should Italy receive all the required raw materials, the army would still not be combat effective before 1944, and the replacement of the old artillery pieces could not occur before 1949. Mussolini correspondingly reduced the initial goal of 126 divisions, establishing a new target of 73 divisions, of which 60 had to be ready by August 1940.<sup>103</sup>

On 21 May 1940, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the new Chief of Staff of the army from 3 November 1939, apprised Mussolini on the status of the mobilization. At that time, the *Regio Esercito* consisted of some 1,650,000 soldiers, organized in 73 divisions with a readiness status in terms of manpower and equipment between 30 and 90 percent (60 percent on average). The divisions were grouped under 24 corps, nine field armies and three army groups. Infantry represented 50 percent of the total, artillery 33 percent, engineer 10 percent, and tank units only 0.5 percent.<sup>104</sup>

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<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/1089856?zoomLevel=1> (accessed 23 September 2013), 6.

<sup>102</sup>Millett, 117.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>104</sup>Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 42.

Firepower was concentrated in 3,200 mortars (45 and 81mm) and 10,000 artillery pieces of different type and caliber, of which 87 percent were First World War equipment and 85 percent were either transported by pack animal or horse-drawn. Tank units were equipped with a total of 1,700 L3/35 light tanks, 70 M11/39 medium tanks, and 150 Fiat 3000 tanks dating from 1921.<sup>105</sup> The army had uniforms and equipment sufficient for 48 percent of the mobilized personnel, lacked horses and mules (50 percent), fuel, artillery and mortar ammunition, needed 30,000 trucks and tires and did not have combat-worthy tanks.<sup>106</sup> As a last point, the Italian soldier was equipped with what the U.S. Army defined “the worst rifle in the world,” the Italian standard mod. 91, and tackled the struggle of combat with a low-energy ration.<sup>107</sup>

Despite Italy not setting the conditions for her army to fight as a modern European military, Italian soldiers fought. They fought even with their poor tactical ability and the equivocal commitment to the Axis from 1943 on.<sup>108</sup> The Second World War view that honor came from the defeat of the Germans, not of the Italians, overlooks some of the achievements of the Italian troops in combat.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, in many history books Rommel’s genius seems to be compromised by the cowardice and slackness of his Italian units.<sup>110</sup> Yet Rommel’s assessment of the Italian units under his

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<sup>105</sup> Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 72, 136.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 62, 138.

<sup>108</sup> Gooderson, 88-89.

<sup>109</sup> Sadkovich, 43.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

command in North Africa, despite his general prejudice against the Italians,<sup>111</sup> might attenuate the misperception of the Italian performance during the Second World War:

The duties of comradeship, for me particularly as [the Italian troops] Commander-in-Chief, compel me to state unequivocally that the defeats which the Italian formations suffered at El Alamein in early July [1942] were not fault of the Italian soldier. The Italian was willing, unselfish and a good comrade, and considering the conditions under which he served, had always given far better than the average. There is no doubt that the achievement of every Italian unit, especially of the motorized forces, far surpassed anything that the Italian Army had done for hundred years . . . the cause of the Italian defeat had its roots in the whole Italian military and state system, in their poor armament and in the general lack of interest in the war shown by many of the leading Italians, both officers and statesmen.<sup>112</sup>

Rommel's depiction of Italian military capabilities stresses how the lack of adequate equipment and interest in the war was the cause of the Italian military ineffectiveness rather than the soldiers' character. It is now clearly evident that Italy entered the Second World War with an army not ready for war. By 30 June 1943, the Italian army had suffered 50,641 killed in action, 121,246 wounded in action, 203,405 missing in action, and 243,960 prisoners of war. At the same time, the army had lost 3,508 vehicles among tanks, self-propelled guns, armored cars, protected vehicles, and gun trucks.<sup>113</sup> The Allied invasion of Sicily represented the final blow for the morale of most of the Italian soldiers. William Munday, a *Sidney Morning Herald* war correspondent, well captured the Italian situation on 30 June 1943: "It is a story of '8,000,000 bayonets' which are blunt—of men who fight dispiritedly not because they lack

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<sup>111</sup>Walker, 68.

<sup>112</sup>Rommel, 261.

<sup>113</sup>Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 102-103.

courage, but because they lack heart and belief in their cause.”<sup>114</sup> The struggle for liberation of the national soil from foreigner troops would give those blunt bayonets a new sharpness.

#### The Italian Airborne Troops from their Origin to September 1943

The history of the Italian airborne troops is one of pioneering spirit, boldness, combat effectiveness, disappointment, and internal divisions. In preparation for the Second World War, Italy planned for the creation of three airborne divisions, but the third (Ciclone) did not become a reality due to the armistice in September 1943. The other two airborne divisions, Folgore and Nembo, demonstrated both in Egypt and in Italy how mistaken the Germans and British were in their assessment of the average Italian soldier's combativeness.

The Italian airborne infantry branch was created in February 1937. By law, the Italian Royal Air Force (*Regia Aeronautica*) was in charge of the creation of the airborne schools necessary to train parachutists coming from all the services. In February 1938 in Castel Benito, Libya, Air Marshal Italo Balbo, governor of Libya, established the first Italian airborne training camp, where some 1,400 Italian and native soldiers were trained in the use of parachute. By 1939, the airborne school trained one airborne regiment, consisting of some 800 native parachutists and 50 Italian NCOs and officers.<sup>115</sup>

Besides technical training, the school was very active in experimenting with appropriate doctrine for the employment of airborne troops. Taking into account some

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<sup>114</sup>Munday.

<sup>115</sup>Nino Arena, *I Paracadutisti: Storia, Cronaca, Immagini del Paracadutismo Militare Italiano* (Parma, Italy: Ermanno Albertelli Editore, 1996), 55-57.

reports coming from General Francesco Saverio Grazioli, the Italian observer during the Soviet Red Army's exercises in 1934-1936, the airborne school in Castel Benito refined and trained the troops in airborne warfare tactics.<sup>116</sup> In May 1938 at Bir el Gnem, exercise Gefara successfully proved the validity of the ongoing studies and experiments. During the exercise, an aerial bombardment of the target zone preceded the drop of the first airborne battalion, which seized and secured a bridgehead surrounding an airstrip. Subsequently, a 3,000-man infantry brigade with its organic equipment air-landed in the bridgehead, reinforced by the second airborne battalion that reached the position in its organic trucks.<sup>117</sup>

In September 1939, a second airborne school was created in Tarquinia near Rome. Starting in March 1940, 57 NCOs and officers attended the first airborne instructor course, which was supposed to last for eight months. Due to the declaration of war, the course was shortened to three months. Yet this limitation did not affect the quality of the program due to strict selection criteria and the hardness of the course itself.<sup>118</sup>

To further exploit the success of the project in Libya, in the spring of 1940 the airborne school of Castel Benito called for volunteers to form an entirely Italian airborne unit. In a few days, some 400 soldiers reached Castel Benito to volunteer as paratroopers. Additionally, despite the lack of spaces in the forming unit, the school trained an

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<sup>116</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 55-57.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 59-60.

additional 300 NCOs and officers that rushed to Castel Benito to become paratroopers, envisaging that airborne-trained personnel would be instrumental in the coming war.<sup>119</sup>

The airborne instructor course in Tarquinia comprised both physical and tactical preparation, whose toughness demonstrates how seriously Italian airborne troops considered training. The trainee airborne instructors had to practice general (running, high jumping, long jumping, pole vaulting, vaulting, flip turns, pole and cord climbing) and special physical training (boxing, judo, dagger fencing, marching, swimming, rowing, horseback riding, motorcycling, and jumping from a training tower). They trained in the use of weapons and flamethrowers, land and air navigation, information collection, signal intelligence, radio communications, chemical defense, and care of combat casualties. Additionally, the trainee instructors underwent special airborne training consisting of individual and mass jumps followed by live fire exercises, seizure of enemy air bases, combat air drops, aircraft boarding procedures, and parachute folding. Only 36 of the initial 57 selected trainee airborne instructors successfully completed the course.<sup>120</sup>

Also the courses for airborne trainees, regardless of rank or branch, were very demanding. Although paratroopers were all volunteers, some 60 percent of them were rejected during the selection phase.<sup>121</sup> The two-phased basic airborne course lasted 50 days. The first phase was built around both physical and technical training, with running,

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<sup>119</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 59-60.

<sup>120</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, "Le Regie Scuole Paracadutisti: Tarquinia e Viterbo," [http://www.nembo.info/Paracadutismo/le\\_regie\\_scuole.htm](http://www.nembo.info/Paracadutismo/le_regie_scuole.htm) (accessed 14 December 2013).

<sup>121</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 75.

push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, cycling, and jumps from the training towers. The airborne training took place during the second phase and ended with three low-altitude jumps (820, 650, and 490 feet). Once they completed airborne training, officers and NCOs took charge of the forming unit to begin the tactical training, which lasted for an additional 30 to 40 days and consisted of combat-like jumps coupled with live firing exercises.<sup>122</sup>

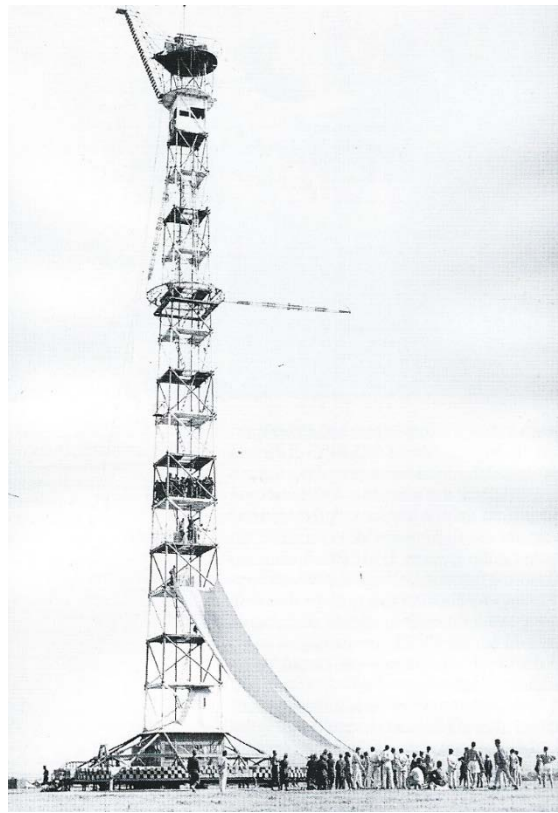


Figure 3. The 214-foot Training Tower of Tarquinia Airborne School, a Decisive Instrument for Psychological Selection

Source: Arena, *I Paracadutisti: Storia, Cronaca, Immagini del Paracadutismo Militare Italiano* (Parma, Italy: Ermanno Albertelli Editore, 1996), 75.

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<sup>122</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, “Le Regie Scuole Paracadutisti.”

As a result of this intense training, in September 1941 the First Airborne Division was created. It consisted of three airborne infantry regiments (with three battalions each), one airborne artillery regiment, one combat engineer battalion, and combat service support units. Initially the division was named after its commander, Major General Enrico Frattini, but lately became 185th Infantry Division “Africa’s Hunters” to deceive enemy intelligence about the real nature of the unit. The division’s three infantry regiments were numbered 185th, 186th, and 187th, while the artillery regiment became the 185th.<sup>123</sup>

In June 1942, 185th Division moved to Apulia in southern Italy to undertake an intense training session in preparation for Operation C3, the planned Italian-German invasion of Malta. Upon C3’s cancellation in October 1942, 185th Division’s new task was the campaign in northern Africa, where it moved at the end of the same month. Once in northern Africa, the division assumed its official name of 185th Airborne Division Folgore. Actually, only two out of the three infantry regiments participated in the campaign in northern Africa. 185th Regiment remained in Italy to build the core of the second airborne division, Nembo. Additionally, in the spring of 1943, the third and eleventh battalions of 185th Regiment moved to Venezia Giulia, northeastern Italy, to counter the Slav guerrillas that were penetrating from Yugoslavia.<sup>124</sup>

The creation of the second airborne division, Nembo, began at the school of Tarquinia during the second half of 1942 and in the second airborne school of Viterbo in early 1943. In November 1942, 184th Airborne Division Nembo was officially created. It

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<sup>123</sup> Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 76-78.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

consisted of 183rd, 184th, and 185th Airborne Infantry Regiments (with three battalions each), 184th Airborne Artillery Regiment, 184th Combat Engineer Battalion, one tank battalion, and one 81mm mortar company. At the beginning of June 1943, the bulk of the division moved to Sardinia with the task of securing airfields and preventing a potential Allied landing. Then in July 1943, 185<sup>th</sup> regiment moved from Venezia Giulia to Sicily and Calabria to counter the ongoing Allied invasion (Operation Husky).<sup>125</sup>

Meanwhile, also the other services were creating their own airborne troops. In 1941, the navy trained one regiment of *nuotatori paracadutisti* (parachute swimmers) coming from its sea-landing unit while the air force created the Royal Air Force First Assault Regiment *Amedeo d'Aosta*. At the same time, the army created a special forces unit, the Tenth Assault Regiment, directly reporting to the army General Staff in Rome.<sup>126</sup>

The quality of the Italian airborne project was proven in battle. Wherever the Italian airborne troops fought, even when defeated, they commanded respect from their enemies. In the Egyptian desert, Folgore became the obsession of the British troops. In the Italian campaign beside the Allies, Nembo paratroops as part of Folgore Combat Group defeated the well-respected German paratroopers Green Devils in Case Grizzano. On the opposite front, other Nembo and Ciclone paratroopers aligned with the Germans stubbornly opposed the Allied landing in Anzio and Nettuno during Operation Shingle.

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<sup>125</sup>Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, "Divisione Nembo (184<sup>a</sup>)—La Storia," [http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia\\_esercito/19431945/LaGuerradiLiberazione/CorpoItalianodiLiberazione/Pagine/DivisioneNemboLaStoria.aspx](http://www.esercito.difesa.it/Storia/storia_esercito/19431945/LaGuerradiLiberazione/CorpoItalianodiLiberazione/Pagine/DivisioneNemboLaStoria.aspx) (accessed 13 December 2013).

<sup>126</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 77.

In the second half of 1942 in Egypt, 185th Folgore Division was responsible for covering 15 kilometers of the Axis southern flank along the defensive line running from El Alamein to the Qattara Depression. From 23 October to 6 November 1942, overwhelming enemy forces continuously attacked the division, but Folgore defeated all the attempts to breach its defensive line. Between 25 and 26 October 1942, Folgore repelled the Allies that were attacking from three different directions with three divisions and two brigades. Such resistance forced Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery, commander of the British Eighth Army, to divert his attack from south to north,<sup>127</sup> where he eventually succeeded.<sup>128</sup>



Figure 4. Close Combat against Enemy Tank in El Alamein

Source: Arena, *I Paracadutisti: Storia, Cronaca, Immagini del Paracadutismo Militare Italiano* (Parma, Italy: Ermanno Albertelli Editore, 1996), 180.

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<sup>127</sup>The northern defensive area was mainly held by German units.

<sup>128</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 125-129.

Folgore Division suffered many combat casualties when Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, commander of the German-Italian army in North Africa, ordered an endless on-foot retreat.<sup>129</sup> Of the 6,500-man divisional total strength, 400 paratroopers died in combat during the second battle of El Alamein, while some 3,000 were captured in the desert, still fighting, while more mobile British forces overran them. Once again, the biggest obstacle for an Italian unit to overcome was the inadequate logistic support and equipment deficiency. Folgore permanently lost some 30 percent of its total strength because of dysentery due to monotonous meals, lack of vitamins, shortage of drinkable water and liquids. The survivors of the long on-foot retreat regrouped in the 285th airborne battalion and fought in Libya and Tunisia against the Allies until mid-1943. The division was officially disbanded at the end of 1942.<sup>130</sup>

Even though usually negative about the Italian performance, the British acknowledged the toughness of Folgore. On 9 September 1942, Heath Brighton, British correspondent for Radio Cairo, commented: “The Italians fought very well. Above all, ‘Folgore’ airborne division resisted beyond any human possibility and hope.”<sup>131</sup> In five days of fighting, Folgore suffered 599 casualties, of whom 39 were officers. Of the 12 commanders on the frontline, eight were killed in action and two were wounded.

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<sup>129</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 109-135.

<sup>130</sup>*Ibid.*, 125-129.

<sup>131</sup>Congedati Folgore, Prefazione, <http://www.congedatifolgore.com/prefazione.html> (accessed 14 September 2013).

Conversely, the British suffered the destruction of 70 tanks, more than 600 killed in action, and 197 prisoners of war, of whom 23 were officers.<sup>132</sup>

Italian airborne troops represent an exception to the general performance of the Italian Royal Army during the Second World War. International history professor MacGregor Knox claimed that Folgore was the only Italian ground unit in the Second World War that entered combat as well-prepared as corresponding American and British units.<sup>133</sup> This assessment might be reasonably expanded to include Nembo, although the division was created after the beginning of the war. Italian airborne troops are a clear demonstration that during Second World War Italian units provided with adequate training and equipment were able to fight as efficiently as Allied and German units. In fact, the widely diffused bias against the Italians, who were considered weak, lazy, cowardly and militarily incompetent,<sup>134</sup> broke on the rocks of El Alamein in October 1942.

The reasons for the Italian airborne troops' achievements must be accounted for. The first factor is that the strict selection criteria and recruitment of only volunteers contributed to the combat-efficiency of the airborne units. Paratroopers were the best youth that Italy could offer. Once selected, both the individual and collective training aimed at instilling hardiness, resilience, and aggressiveness in order to instill the will to

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<sup>132</sup>Alessia Biasolo, "La Battaglia di El Alamein" (paper presented at the conference "La Divisione Brescia nella battaglia di El Alamein" of the Centro di Studi Storico-Militari "Generale Gino Bernardini" in Bologna, 30 November 2012), <http://www.centrostudimilitari.it/Conferenze%20testi/2012-11-30.pdf> (accessed 14 December 2013), 6-8.

<sup>133</sup>Knox, 144.

<sup>134</sup>Walker, 68.

persevere under the most adverse conditions. At El Alamein, a paratrooper refused treatment on his shredded right hand so that the Italian doctor could take care of a British soldier with a chest wound. When the doctor invited the Italian paratrooper to get into the ambulance to reach the casualty collection point, the paratrooper replied: “Sir, I forgot to tell you that I am left-handed” and headed back to his fighting position.<sup>135</sup>

The Italian paratroopers’ offensive mentality was sometimes a concern for their German ally. During the northern Africa campaign, Field Marshal Rommel urged Major General Frattini not to expose excessively the paratroopers from Folgore while attacking the British. Even Major General Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke, commander of the German combat-experienced airborne brigade *Fallschirmjäger*, suggested more prudence in chasing and harassing the British troops.<sup>136</sup>

Such a spirit created an efficient and extremely cohesive officer and NCO corps. In the airborne troops, commanders at any level set the example and led by example. In March 1938 at Castel Benito’s airborne school, all the Italian officers jumped first from the airplanes to instill courage in the Libyan trainees. Right after the jump, Colonel Goffredo Tonini, the designated battalion commander, talked to his subordinates asking them if they felt ready to follow their commander’s example. Colonel Tonini set the example, thus overcoming the Libyan diffidence, and allowing the airborne school to start its training activity. Even though this might be considered an easy way to set the example, actually it is not if one considers that in 1938 the parachute was far from a safe

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<sup>135</sup>Paolo Caccia Dominioni, and Alberto Bechi Luserna, “I Ragazzi della Folgore” (Milan, Italy: La Libreria Militare, 2007), in *Uomo Folgore, La Folgore*, [http://www.uomofolgore.it/la\\_folgore.htm](http://www.uomofolgore.it/la_folgore.htm) (accessed 15 December 2013).

<sup>136</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 114.

means to air-land. In fact, by May 1938 the airborne school experienced 18 dead and 80 wounded during jump exercises.<sup>137</sup>

Such an attitude created a bond between the ranks that overcame the officer corps hierarchical mentality that prevailed elsewhere in the Royal Italian Army. In an atmosphere where the officers set the example, the usual type of junior officer full of bluster and exaggerated dignity did not survive.<sup>138</sup>

The combination of these factors leads to the most prominent feature of the Italian airborne, namely a high *esprit de corps*. No matter the flag Italian paratroopers fought for, they always felt like they belonged to the same family. On 5 May 1945, when the war was already over, one military convoy of defeated Folgore paratroopers of the Italian Social Republic was heading south to a prison camp near Pisa. Along the way near Piacenza, the convoy came across another convoy of cobelligerent Nembo paratroopers heading north. They recognized one another and, despite the war having divided them, after jumping from the trucks, started to hug and greet each other. The escorting British and American soldiers watched with astonishment and did not realize what was going on. When the convoys departed in opposite directions, both parties started to sing the paratroopers' battle song, *Come Folgore dal Cielo . . . come Nembo di tempesta . . .*. These paratroopers had much more in common than what had divided them.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, 66-67.

<sup>138</sup>Knox, 147-148.

<sup>139</sup>Congedati Folgore, "Avevo 22 anni ed ero Ufficiale del rgt. Folgore," R.S.I. A cura del Comandante Tomasina, Intervento al Rotary Monza del 13.02.01," <http://www.congedatifolgore.com/main.htm> (accessed 15 December 2013).

Besides specialization and shared hardship, the value given to training generated cohesion and integration. Before getting into combat, Folgore could exploit 21 months of intense training while Nembo 18. Individual training was the initial main focus, and concerned everyone from soldier to general. One measure of how much Italian airborne troops valued training occurred in April 1945. Although the Germans had already agreed to surrender, the Italian Social Republic's airborne school at Tradate continued to train paratroopers.<sup>140</sup>



Figure 5. An Example of Folgore *Esprit de Corps*, Cohesion and Boldness

*Source: Arena, I Paracadutisti: Storia, Cronaca, Immagini del Paracadutismo Militare Italiano* (Parma, Italy: Ermanno Albertelli Editore, 1996), 105. Second Lieutenant Giovanni “Nino” Starace, despite the loss of the left arm during a training incident, insisted on taking the airborne qualification. Colonel Giuseppe Baudoin de Gillette, commandant of the airborne school, personally supported Starace in the challenge. “Nino” took part in the North Africa campaign, earning a gold medal of military valor for bravery in combat action.

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<sup>140</sup>Nino Arena, *Pagine Militari. Vol. 17, Nembo!* (Roma, Italy: IBN, 2013), 295.

An additional performance-enhancing factor was a continuous emphasis on innovation. The airborne school created an Experiments and Studies Branch (ESB) in charge of all the technical and doctrinal innovations. In July 1940, after some jump accidents with the Salvador D.39 parachute, Castel Benito airborne school's ESB was able to develop and homologate a new parachute from scratch in only three months, thus resuming airborne training in October 1940. Additionally, ESBs developed new service and combat uniforms, jump boots, an airborne-certified helmet, individual combat jump equipment, and individual weapon containers. Additionally, Castel Benito's ESB validated the procedure to airdrop the 47/32 artillery piece while Tarquinia's ESB contributed to the development of an airborne-certified folding motorcycle called *Volugrafo Aermoto*.<sup>141</sup>

Innovation concerned not only materiel factors or technical procedures. Both Folgore and Nembo Divisions were able to adapt consolidated tactical procedures to contingent situations. This is the case of Third and Eleventh Battalions of 185th Regiment during the counter-guerrilla operation in Venezia Giulia in March 1943. Realizing that the situation required a new tactical approach, airborne battalions disrupted the logistical system that supported the guerrillas, conducted hasty ambushes to harass guerilla movement, and patrolled deep into the guerillas' safe haven areas. At the end of June 1943, the situation had noticeably improved and the two airborne battalions returned to their home station.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Associazione Nazionale Nembo, "Le Regie Scuole Paracauditisti."

<sup>142</sup> Arena, *Pagine Militari. Vol. 17, Nembo!*, 20-21.

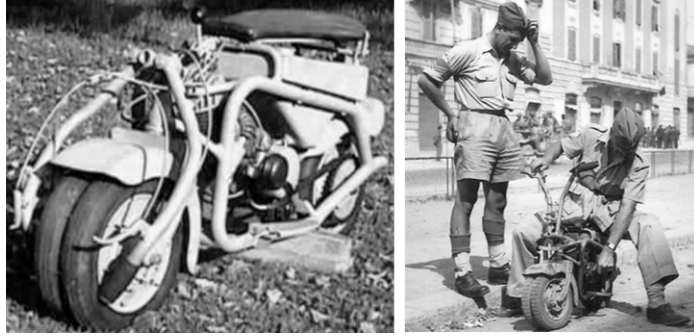


Figure 6. The Folding Motorbike Volugrafo Aermoto

*Source:* Scoot'toujours, "Le scooters dans l'armée," <http://scoot-toujours.over-blog.com/categorie-11905429.html> (accessed 18 December 2013).

Additionally, in northern Africa in 1942 Folgore Division developed tactics to counterbalance the ineffectiveness of the 47/32 antitank gun and the lack of protection against British tanks. At the end of the enemy heavy artillery barrage preceding an attack, paratroopers remained hidden in their unprotected but camouflaged foxholes. They allowed the enemy to advance past their positions before launching a counterattack. The offensive counter action consisted of the destruction of the enemy tanks using Molotov cocktails and magnetic mines and then an attack on enemy infantry with either firearms or daggers.<sup>143</sup>

When Italian airborne troops entered combat in 1942, the Allies still considered the Italians spaghetti soldiers who would easily surrender. At the end of 1942, the Allies had changed, at least partially, their cliché about the combativeness of the Italian soldier. Folgore and Nembo Divisions were elite units and represented an exception within the general panorama of the Italian army during the Second World War. The two divisions

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<sup>143</sup>Piero Crociani and Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Italian Army Elite Units and Special Forces 1940-43* (Botley, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2011), 28.

exploited both a longer pre-combat training period and the assignment of highly selective personnel. What those paratroopers were able to do under the most adverse conditions, still lives on in the Italian contemporary paratroopers' memory, thus being "proud of our past, [and] always worthy of our unfailing future."<sup>144</sup>

### Twentieth Infantry Division Friuli, 1939-September 1943

Unlike Folgore or Nembo Divisions, Friuli Division's history is more ordinary. In fact, Friuli did not experience large-scale and prolonged combat engagements since it had only limited combat deployments in Yugoslavia in 1941 (18 days) and in Corsica in 1943 (26 days). Additionally, Friuli Division was activated only a few times before the beginning of the Second World War, and thus lacked a consolidated training methodology and adequate preparation for war.

Twentieth Infantry Division Friuli originated from Friuli Brigade, established on 1 November 1884 and disbanded on 28 December 1926 as a consequence of the transformation of the divisional array from binary to ternary. In 1939, with the reversion to the binary setup, Twentieth Infantry Division Friuli was restored as a result of the reorganization of the Twentieth Infantry Division *Curtatone e Montanara*. At that time, Friuli Division consisted of the Eighty-Seventh and Eighty-Eighth Infantry Regiments, and the Thirty-Fifth Artillery Regiment.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Excerpt from the Italian paratroops' prayer.

<sup>145</sup>Regio Esercito, "Le Forze Armate-20a Divisione di fanteria Friuli," Regio Esercito, <http://www.regioesercito.it/reparti/fanteria/rediv20.htm> (accessed 16 December 2013).

In June 1940, the division mobilized and moved to Piedmont in northwestern Italy, in anticipation of a possible combat deployment on the western front. Despite being a mobilized division, the Friuli regiments reached their maximum strength only at the beginning of July 1940, when they were able to fill 75 percent of their ranks.<sup>146</sup> Due to the swift conclusion of the campaign against France, Friuli Division did not enter in combat and, in August 1940, it was moved to Veneto region in northeastern Italy as part of the Italian Seventh Corps.

An analysis of the war diary of Friuli Division and subordinate units shows how the division spent most of its training period from June to September 1940 by conducting small unit-level exercises from squad to company.<sup>147</sup> Training mainly consisted of drills, weapons handling, and live fire exercises. Regiments and battalions performed also several 20-30 km foot marches to exercise soldiers, refine marching procedures, and check passing time.<sup>148</sup>

Infantry battalions performed only one live fire exercise each<sup>149</sup> while the division as a whole conducted only one foot march with complete combat equipment (1 July 1940) and an exercise with opposing parties (28 to 29 August 1940).<sup>150</sup> Artillery, mortar,

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<sup>146</sup>88th Infantry Regiment War Diary, 9 June–31 July 1940, Italian Army Staff Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>147</sup>20th Infantry Division, Friuli War Diary, June–September 1940, Italian Army Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup>Regiments executed also a couple of maneuvers to coordinate battalions' movements.

<sup>150</sup>20th Infantry Division, Friuli War Diary, June–September 1940.

and machine gun units conducted several exercises, some of them in direct support of infantry formations.<sup>151</sup> On many occasions, the division commander expressed his satisfaction with the morale and preparation of his soldiers,<sup>152</sup> even though within the sources there are no after action reports to assess the effectiveness of the training or its outcome.

In April 1941, Friuli Division moved to Venezia Giulia in northeastern Italy to take part in the invasion of Yugoslavia as part of the Italian Sixth Corps. Therein, the division's task was to penetrate the enemy defensive line in the area between Iga Vas and Babina Poljca.<sup>153</sup> Friuli Division crossed the Yugoslavian border on 11 April 1941. On 12 April, the division reached Loska Dolina and Loski Potok and on 14 April took control of the area between Trsce–Mali Lug–Presce. On 18 April 1941, the campaign ended with the Yugoslavian request for an unconditional surrender. At that time, Friuli Division had advanced some forty kilometers into Yugoslavian territory, where it remained until the beginning of May.<sup>154</sup>

On 5 May 1941, after 18 days in Yugoslavia, Friuli Division returned to Italy, undertaking territorial defensive tasks in Tuscany<sup>155</sup> and prepared for the invasion of Corsica (Operation C2). For this specific operation, in December 1941, Friuli Division

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<sup>151</sup>Regiments executed also a couple of maneuvers to coordinate battalions' movements.

<sup>152</sup>20th Infantry Division, Friuli War Diary, June–September 1940.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid.

<sup>154</sup>Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle unità italiane in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)*, (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico SME, 1978), 62-63.

<sup>155</sup>Regio Esercito, "Le Forze Armate–20a Divisione di fanteria Friuli."

was tasked to train as a sea-landing and assault division.<sup>156</sup> In May 1942, Friuli Division was additionally directed to prepare for Operation C3, the invasion of Malta. At that point, Brigadier General Giacomo Carboni, the division's commander, pointed out that Friuli still lacked a suitable war establishment, skilled officers, properly selected soldiers, and special training to undertake C2.<sup>157</sup> Carboni made clear that Operation C3 was beyond the capability of Friuli even more than C2 and stressed that the division's deficiencies could not be overcome in a short amount of time.<sup>158</sup>

In October 1942 Operation C3 was cancelled and a month later the division moved to Corsica with its two organic infantry regiments, one legion (regiment) of "black shirts,"<sup>159</sup> one artillery regiment, one engineer battalion, one 81mm mortar battalion, one 47/32 antitank battalion, and additional combat service support units. In Corsica, the division had to provide for the defense of the northern sector of the island while Cremona Infantry Division had responsibility for the southern sector. Both divisions created mobile tactical groups able to integrate into the fixed defense provided by the two coastal divisions deployed there.<sup>160</sup> Friuli Division performed territorial defensive tasks until

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<sup>156</sup>Brigadier General Giacomo Carboni (Friuli division commander) to Commander, Eighth Corps, 28 May 1942, 4918/C.M., "Esigenza C-3," in Operation C-3 folder, Italian Army Staff Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid.

<sup>159</sup>Fascist paramilitary armed units.

<sup>160</sup>Romano Rossi, *Il Gruppo di Combattimento Friuli 1944-1945* (Imola, Italy: Bacchilega editore, 2009), 6.

September 1943, when the armistice with the Allies forced the division to take action against the German troops stationed in Corsica.

To conclude, from 1939 to September 1943 Twentieth Friuli Division saw little combat action. Even though the division entered in combat only in April 1941, the division was mobilized and trained for war in a very short period of time.<sup>161</sup> It was trained as an ordinary division and the attempt made in 1942 to transform it in a sea-landing and assault division for Operation C3 crashed against the organization shortcomings of Friuli. In fact, as Brigadier General Carboni recognized, the division lacked the force structure, special training, experienced and talented officers, and quality conscripts to undertake such specialized operations.

### Summary

In 1939, the Italian army was not prepared for war. A common and shallow belief blames most the defeats suffered by the *Regio Esercito* during the Second World War on the supposed lack of Italian fighting spirit. Instead, the root causes of Italian military unpreparedness were political and organizational. On one hand, the interwar deployments in Ethiopia, Spain, and Greece allowed Italian military leadership to identify many shortcomings preventing the military from becoming a modern fighting force. On the other, Mussolini simply dismissed the shortcomings or assumed they were being corrected.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup>Friuli's infantry regiment were created at the beginning of June 1940.

<sup>162</sup>Millett, 107-108.

Additionally, the army received less political attention than either the navy or the air force during the modernization process,<sup>163</sup> maintaining most of its First World War force structure, doctrine, equipment, and organization. Mussolini assumed that even an outdated fighting force imbued with fascist spirit could overcome any more technologically advanced military, thus disregarding the importance of material factors to success in war.<sup>164</sup> A lack of raw materials<sup>165</sup> and technical expertise to build state-of-the-art combat vehicles or weapons also hampered the modernization process. In addition, the industrial-military lobby exerted political pressure and often dictated the quantity and quality of military equipment purchased.<sup>166</sup>

Other causes for the Italian army's unpreparedness for war were organizational in nature. The army was not attractive to young and educated males since it retained most of the conservative, high-ranking officers that had fought during the First World War.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the officer corps was short on mutual trust and lacked vertical integration with NCOs and soldiers.<sup>168</sup> Many high-ranking officers also shared the view that training was not important for combat effectiveness since personal courage and valor counted more in achieving victory in battle.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>163</sup>Millett, 108.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>166</sup>Knox, 28-30.

<sup>167</sup>Walker, 24.

<sup>168</sup>Millett and Murray, 162-163.

<sup>169</sup>Knox, 144.

Such a situation, however, was not common to all the units of the *Regio Esercito*. In fact, those formations that had proper training, sound doctrine, and high *esprit de corps* found success during the war. This was, for example, the case for Folgore Airborne Division, a unit that entered combat in Second World War as well-prepared as any corresponding American or British unit.<sup>170</sup> Folgore's example reinforces the concept that the so-called Italian character played no role in determining the success or failure of many Italian units in combat. Indeed, the interwar political myopia and organizational failures accounted for most of the inefficiency of the army during the war.

In September 1943, the disastrous course of the war forced Italy to request an armistice with the Allies. For Italy, the consequences of the armistice were so serious that it threatened the survival of a national defense organization. Despite this, Italian authorities were not willing to give up or to allow the Italian Campaign to become purely a struggle between the Allies and the Germans. In fact, from the signing of the armistice, Italian authorities requested an active military role in the Italian Campaign. The Allies initially rejected the Italian offer of assistance; the poor status of the Italian army in 1943 was not the only reason for this decision. Later, the Allies changed their mind, and, in mid-1944, authorized the raising of the ICA to expedite the war effort in Italy.

The following chapter investigates the effects of the armistice of September 1943 on the Italian military, the initial reasons for the Allies refusing major Italian military involvement in the Italian Campaign, and the motivations for the change of heart that led to the raising of the ICA. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes Allied efforts to provide military assistance to the ICA in terms of training, equipment, and organization, and

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<sup>170</sup>Knox, 144.

illuminates both the successes and limitations of the Allied assistance effort. It is to these issues we now turn.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE RAISING OF THE ICA

The actual armed participation of the Italians in our military effort is of so little interest to us that, if we can fob them off with such sops to their notions of prestige, this may be the most satisfactory answer to their reiterated demands for a more active part in the war.

— British Foreign Office, “Cable R10412, Italy,” in Foreign Office, “Italian Army: Re-equipment of Three Division”

#### The Armistice and its Effects

In September 1943, the armistice with the Allies further degraded the combat effectiveness of the *Regio Esercito*. In many ways, the armistice represented the first step in gaining the status of cobelligerent. However, the material and political consequences of the armistice threatened the survival of the defense organization for Italy. Most of the Italian Army’s equipment was either taken by the Germans or transferred by the Allies to rearm French army as well as to support anti-German partisans.

On 8 September 1943 at 6:30 p.m., General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, announced over the radio that the Italian Government had surrendered unconditionally. An hour later, at 7:30 p.m., the *pro tempore* Italian Prime Minister Marshal Pietro Badoglio<sup>171</sup> confirmed via radio that the Italian Government, with the object of avoiding further and more grievous harm to the nation, had requested an armistice from General Eisenhower. From

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<sup>171</sup> Marshal Pietro Badoglio became Prime Minister after the fall of Benito Mussolini’s government on 25 July 1943.

that moment on, the Italian forces would therefore cease all acts of hostility against the Anglo-U.S. forces and oppose attack from any other quarter.

Two hours earlier at 5:30 p.m., King Victor Emmanuel the Third called the highest government officials to a Crown Council. At the end of a strained meeting, the King ordered Marshal Badoglio to disclose the terms of the armistice signed with the Allies on 3 September 1943.<sup>172</sup> Italian motivation and morale had already been broken by the defeat in North Africa and the loss of Sicily. The Italians under arms wished only to end the fighting and rid the nation of the Fascists that had declared war without adequate preparation.<sup>173</sup> At the same time, the Italian Supreme Command hoped the armistice would stop “the [Allied] terroristic bombing of cities, since the aim of terrorizing the civilian populace, thus forcing the request for an armistice, had already been achieved.”<sup>174</sup>

Marshal Badoglio’s proclamation was the climax of a long and troubled process begun a couple of months earlier. After the fall of Mussolini’s government on 24 July 1943, Italian authorities found the idea of breaking the alliance with Germany and asking for an armistice with the Allies increasingly appealing. On 27 July 1943, the German response to the political instability in Italy was the activation of *Alarich*, an operational plan drafted in May 1943 in anticipation of a potential Italian defection from the

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<sup>172</sup>Riccardo Scarpa, “Il Consiglio della Corona dell’8 Settembre 1943, nelle memorie del maggiore Luigi Marchesi e nelle motivazioni del Maresciallo Pietro Badoglio e di S. M. il Re Vittorio Emanuele III,” *Il Secondo Risorgimento d’Italia*, no. 3 (23 August 2007): 23-28, <http://www.secondorisorgimento.it/rivista/sommari/tomo07.03.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2013).

<sup>173</sup>Biribicchi, 91.

<sup>174</sup>Loi, 32-33.

alliance.<sup>175</sup> *Alarich* consisted of several actions to be executed in sequence. The first one was *Schwarz*, namely the occupation and control of key infrastructure, the neutralization of Italian units, and the seizure of the main seaports. *Achse*, the capture of the Italian fleet in La Spezia, would follow *Schwarz* and be the precursor to *Student*, the occupation of Rome and the taking over of the Italian government. As a last action, *Eiche* aimed at the liberation of Mussolini, who had been under arrest since 25 July 1943.<sup>176</sup>

While the Germans reacted swiftly to the political change in Italy, Italian authorities took some time to understand and counter German actions. In fact, only on 10 August 1943 did the Royal Army General Staff (RAGS) issue *Foglio 111 CT* to warn subordinate commands to guard against German action as a result of the degraded political situation. Furthermore, the paper gave instructions to reinforce surveillance on key strategic infrastructure and plan for surprise action against key German units. The execution order for the plan would come either from RAGS or, in the case of hostile German acts, through the initiative of the concerned commanders.<sup>177</sup>

Concurrently, Italian authorities made the first attempt to contact Allied officials to negotiate Italy's exit from the war. On 11 August 1943, Marshal Vittorio Ambrosio, Chief of the Italian Supreme Command, directed his personal aide, Brigadier General

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<sup>175</sup>Loi, 11.

<sup>176</sup>Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, *La partecipazione delle Forze Armate, alla Guerra di Liberazione e di Resistenza, 8 Settembre 1943–8 Maggio 1945* (Rome, Italy: Ente Editoriale per l'Arma dei Carabinieri, 2003), [http://www.difesa.it/Area\\_Storica\\_HTML/editoria/2003a/Pagine/2003a.aspx](http://www.difesa.it/Area_Storica_HTML/editoria/2003a/Pagine/2003a.aspx) (accessed 12 November 2013), 11.

<sup>177</sup>Massimo Muntari, "I Militari Dopo l'8 Settembre," University of Rome "Tor Vergata," *Annals of the History Department*, no. 2 (2006): 58, [http://www.biblink.it/download%20PDF/Annali\\_\\_2\\_06.pdf](http://www.biblink.it/download%20PDF/Annali__2_06.pdf) (accessed 24 September 2013).

Giuseppe Castellano, to go to Madrid,<sup>178</sup> meet the British Ambassador Sir Samuel Hoare, relate the Italian situation, and discover the Allies' intentions. A few days later on 19 August 1943, Castellano met with George Kennan, the U.S. *Chargé d'Affaires* in London, Brigadier General Walter Bedell Smith, Major General Eisenhower's Chief of Staff at the Allied Forces Headquarters, and Brigadier General Sir Kenneth William Dobson Strong, Assistant Chief of Staff G-2 at the Allied Forces Headquarters.<sup>179</sup>

During this meeting, Smith and Strong presented Castellano with a paper personally written by General Eisenhower containing the terms for an armistice. When Castellano returned to Rome on 27 August 1943, he reported the terms for the armistice to Marshal Badoglio.<sup>180</sup> While Italian political authorities discussed the terms of the armistice proposed by the Allies, on 31 August 1943, RAGS issued an additional directive, *Memoria 44 OP*, to further clarify the reaction in case of German aggression. In it, RAGS directed subordinate units to shut down the northeastern and northwestern alpine passes, protect the Italian fleet in La Spezia and Taranto, and secure the capital city.<sup>181</sup>

A few days later, on 3 September 1943, in Cassibile (Sicily), Castellano and Smith signed the short armistice that ended hostilities between Italy and the Allies. On 6

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<sup>178</sup>Madrid was a suitable location to negotiate an armistice due to the neutrality of Spain during the Second World War.

<sup>179</sup>U.S. Office of Strategic Services, RG 226, Diario del Generale Giuseppe Castellano Luglio.

<sup>180</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup>Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, *La partecipazione delle Forze Armate alla Guerra di Liberazione e di Resistenza*, 12.

September 1943, RAGS issued additional and more detailed instructions on how to deal with the Germans through *Memoria 45 OP*, *Promemoria n. 1*, and *Promemoria n. 2*. These latest instructions, however, did not reach all concerned commands (or reached them too late) before the announcement of the armistice due to the extreme precautions taken to preserve secrecy.<sup>182</sup>

As a result, when the armistice was announced on 8 September 1943, the Chief of the Army General Mario Roatta explicitly requested Ambrosio for the authorization to implement *Memoria 44 OP* and additional memos. Ambrosio denied the authorization, claiming that the Italians should not initiate any hostilities against the Germans.<sup>183</sup> Only on 11 September 1943 did the Supreme Command notify the three armed forces' chiefs that, since the Germans had deliberately initiated hostile activity against Italian units, they were now to be considered enemies.<sup>184</sup> Since there was not an open declaration of war, the Germans did not consider the captured Italians to be legitimate prisoners of war, thus negating the basic guarantees of international law.<sup>185</sup>

Therefore, in the confusion following the armistice, the Germans had sound plans and clear orders while the Italians did not. On the mainland, Italian units exercised their own initiative to counterbalance the lack of orders from the central staff. Yet the lack of clarity put the fate of most Italian units in the hands of the German commanders. In fact,

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<sup>182</sup>Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, *La partecipazione delle Forze Armate alla Guerra di Liberazione e di Resistenza*, 12.

<sup>183</sup>Muntari, 61.

<sup>184</sup>Loi, 20.

<sup>185</sup>*Ibid.*, 26-27.

the 24 divisions<sup>186</sup> stationed in Italy and Corsica in early 1943 minimally resisted German aggression, and Italian operations against German forces were on a small scale and uncoordinated.<sup>187</sup>

Although these operations were not decisive for the defeat of German forces in Italy, Italian units were able to prevent them from achieving some objectives of Alarich plan. At the same time, these engagements facilitated the ongoing Allied campaign in southern Italy. In fact, in Liguria, the Italians effectively delayed German units, allowing the Italian fleet to sail and avoid capture. Near Rome, Italian units engaged the German Third *Panzergrenadier* and the Second *Fallschirmjager* Divisions, preventing them from reaching Salerno, where the Allies were executing Operation Avalanche.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup>Nine divisions were not considered operational since in the reset phase after participation in the Russian campaign. Additionally, Centauro armored division was not at its full strength and consisted mainly of fascist militiamen.

<sup>187</sup>Muntari, 60.

<sup>188</sup>*Ibid.*, 60-62.

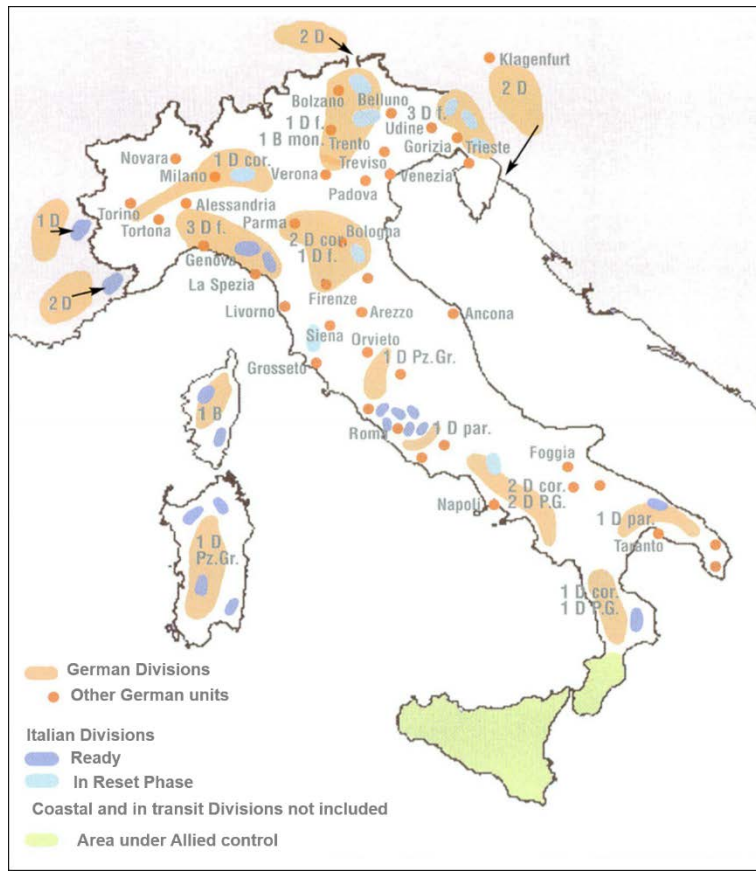


Figure 7. September 1943, Position of the German and Italian Forces in Italy

Source: Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, *La partecipazione delle Forze Armate alla Guerra di Liberazione e di Resistenza. 8 Settembre 1943–8 Maggio 1945* (Rome: Ente Editoriale per l'Arma dei Carabinieri, 2003), 34.

With the exception of a few limited successes, the outcome of the armistice for the Italian Army was devastating. On 7 November 1943, the German Army Chief of Staff, General Alfred Jodl, reported to Hitler the Italian military situation: “Fifty-one divisions disarmed, twenty-nine probably disarmed, three not disarmed, more than 500,000 prisoners of whom 35,000 were officers.”<sup>189</sup> In Italy alone, the Germans

<sup>189</sup>Biribicchi, 94.

captured and transferred more than 700,000 Italian military personnel to concentration camps in Germany.<sup>190</sup> 26,000 Italian soldiers died in September 1943 as a result of combat operations against either the Allies or the Germans. An additional 40,000 Italian soldiers died in German concentration camps and another 20,000 during the Italian campaign.<sup>191</sup>

The material consequences of the disarmament were severe as well. The *Wehrmacht* (German Army) captured 985,106 pistols, rifles and submachine guns, 22,523 machineguns, 2,700 artillery pieces, 3,059 mortars, 606 antitank cannon, 562 tanks, 5,269 trucks, 10,053 horses and mules, and 40,000 tons of ammunition. By 10 October 1943, the German Army had employed 12,034 rail cars to transport all the captured equipment to Germany. Most of the self-propelled guns were used to equip German infantry divisions deployed in Italy, while the tanks were widely distributed among the various German frontline units.<sup>192</sup>

The events of 8 September had two main political consequences. The first was that, from that point until the end of the war, Italy would be divided into two different political entities. The first one was the so-called Southern Kingdom, governed mainly by the 57 members of the royal family along with high-ranking military commanders. On 9 September, these leaders left Rome for Brindisi in order to establish a government in an area under Italian control. The second political entity was the result of the liberation of Mussolini, who was under arrest in Campo Imperatore. On 12 September, German

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<sup>190</sup>Biribicchi, 94.

<sup>191</sup>Muntari, 80.

<sup>192</sup>Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra, 1940-1945*, 372-374.

paratroopers freed Mussolini and took him to Munich.<sup>193</sup> A few days later, with the support of Germany, Mussolini established the Italian Social Republic with its capitol in Salò. The Italian Social Republic comprised most of central and northern Italy.

The second political consequence was the limitation of the executive power of the only legitimate government recognized by the Allies in Italy, namely the Southern Kingdom. This limitation was the result of the long armistice signed at Malta on 29 September 1943. The Italian government headed by Marshal Badoglio negotiated the long armistice with through an *ad hoc* commission activated by the Allies under the direction of British General Noel Mason-MacFarlane. The commission arrived in Brindisi on 12 September 1943 under the title “Military Mission Italian Army (MMIA).”<sup>194</sup> The negotiation of the long-term armistice further strained relationships between Italian and Allied authorities due to the disagreement between the parties on the topic of Italy’s unconditional surrender.

In fact, whereas the short armistice of Cassibile imposed only the “immediate cessation of all hostile activity by the Italian armed forces,” the long armistice in its initial version directed that “the Italian land, sea and air forces wherever located, hereby surrender unconditionally.”<sup>195</sup> Facing Italian authorities’ unwillingness to accept a military unconditional surrender, the Allies reminded Marshal Badoglio that Article 12 of

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<sup>193</sup>Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, *La partecipazione delle Forze Armate alla Guerra di Liberazione e di Resistenza*, 37-38.

<sup>194</sup>The National Archives, “Records of Allied Operational and Occupational Headquarters, World War II,” National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/331.html> (accessed on 5 December 2013).

<sup>195</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate, *Surrender of Italy, Germany, and Japan World War II*.

the short armistice called for Italy to accept the long armistice as well.<sup>196</sup> However, to overcome the diplomatic deadlock, in the final draft of the “long armistice,” the Allies settled for interpreting *surrender* to mean an Italian acceptance of the armistice terms and not the surrender of Italy’s armed forces.<sup>197</sup>

Apart from the dispute about the terms, the long armistice actually deprived Badoglio’s government of most of its authority. In fact, on 10 November 1943 MMIA transformed into the Allied Control Commission for Italy, whose main tasks were the transfer of Allied-occupied Italian territory to Italian Government jurisdiction and to ensure the Italian Government’s adherence to the armistice.<sup>198</sup> The Allied Control Commission performed additional functions, such as control of the drafting of law and clearance of bills before their promulgation.<sup>199</sup>

The Allied Control Commission consisted of 18 different sub-commissions that, acting like *de facto* government departments, represented all the functional areas of the governance of a country. The Army Sub-Commission, Marine Sub-Commission, and Air Force Sub-Commission proved to be the most important for the fate of the Italian armed forces during the Allied Italian campaign because of their decision to cut most of its residual combat capabilities.

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<sup>196</sup>Loi, 26-28.

<sup>197</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>198</sup>The National Archives, “Records of Allied Operational and Occupational Headquarters, World War II.”

<sup>199</sup>Arena, *L’Italia in Guerra 1940-1945*, 376.

In fact, the Army Sub-Commission established the Italian army's total strength at 300,000 soldiers (10 percent of the total before the armistice), with no more than 40,000 in a fighting role. These 40,000 soldiers would later become the bulk of the six combat groups (*Gruppi di Combattimento*). An additional 175,000 soldiers were to be employed as the combat service support element of the Fifteenth Army Group, with 48,000 under the Allied Control Commission's direct authority for internal defense and control, and the other 30,000 as military manual laborers.<sup>200</sup>

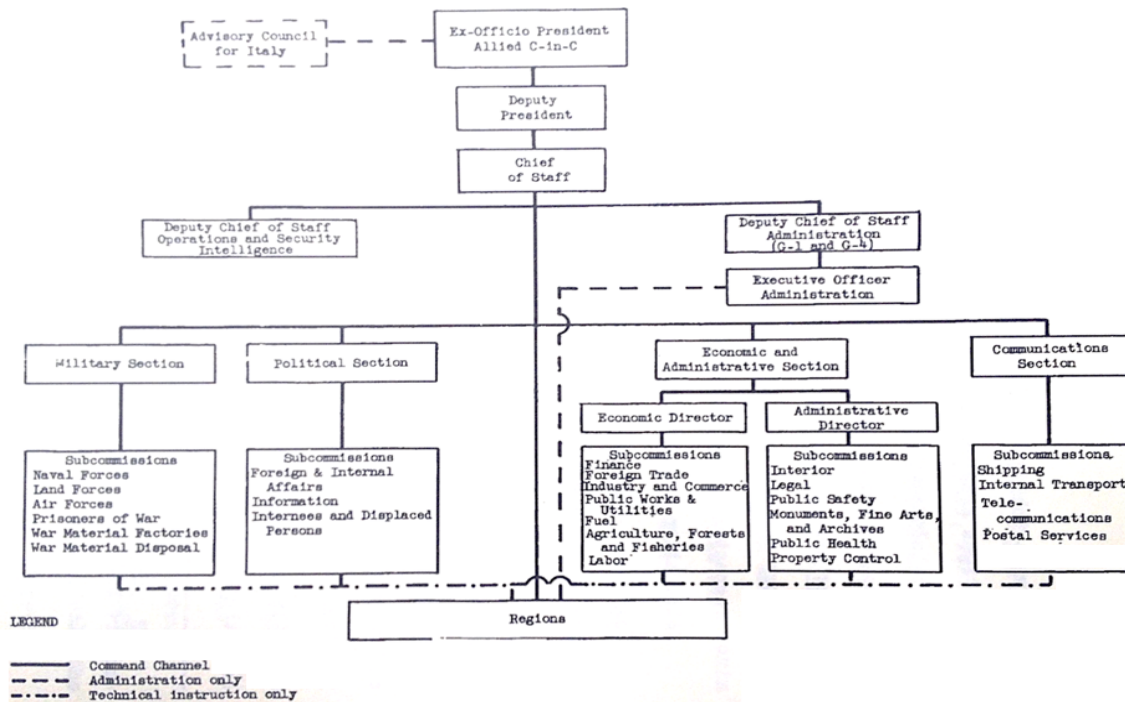


Figure 8. November 1943, Organizational Chart of the Allied Control Commission for Italy

Source: Robert W. Komer, *Civil Affairs and Military Government in the Mediterranean Theater* (Washington, DC: Department of The Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1950), IV-21.

<sup>200</sup> Arena, *L'Italia in Guerra 1940-1945*, 377.

To conclude, the armistice was a renewed trial for Italy. After the fall of Mussolini's government on 25 July 1943, Badoglio's public announcement that "the war continues"<sup>201</sup> froze the joy that for a while warmed the exhausted Italian soul. In September 1943, despite the signing of two armistices, the war was not over yet. On 13 October 1943, the declaration of war on Germany was the final confirmation that war would continue and would be fought on Italian soil. Through the declaration of war on Germany, Italy gained the status of cobelligerent. This meant that Italy was no longer an enemy but not yet an ally due to understandable Allied mistrust.<sup>202</sup> Along with cobelligerency, the declaration of war on Germany gave a new inspiration to Italian soldiers' willingness to fight. In fact, for the army of the Southern Kingdom, cobelligerency would be the starting point for Italian redemption after the shame of unilaterally breaking the so-called Pact of Steel with Germany.

Reasons for Raising a Cobelligerent Army:  
from Initial Hesitation to Final Clearance

Although the decision to raise an ICA was an Allied one, most of the arguments over exploiting Italy's military support took place within the British side of the Alliance. In fact, "British policy after the fall of Mussolini . . . sought to weaken Italy so as to deny it any possibility of future aggression. This new Italy would be under British hegemony,

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<sup>201</sup>Garland and McGaw Smyth, sub. 4, vol. 2, pt. 1, ch. 15, Dissolution of the Rome-Berlin Axis, 281.

<sup>202</sup>Biribicchi, 93.

an integral part of its postwar strategy in the Mediterranean.”<sup>203</sup> Additionally, the initial Allied policy on the matter further complicated the decision since it demanded complete Allied victory and Axis unconditional surrender as a condition for ending the war. Later on, during the Italian campaign in 1944, the Allies realized that closing the ring around Germany required an increasing number of troops. Therefore, the British suggested that the Allies review their initial policy. The result of this event eventually allowed Italy to contribute actively in liberating her soil from German occupation.

More than any other military consideration, the Allied policy regarding defeated Axis powers played an essential role in hindering Italian military contributions to Allied war effort. On 14 August 1941, point eight of the Atlantic Charter declared as essential the disarmament of the nations that continue to employ such instruments to threaten aggression outside of their frontiers.<sup>204</sup> Additionally, in January 1942, a United Nations declaration made at the end of the Arcadia Conference stated that “complete victory over the enemies is essential to defend life, liberty, independence and religious freedom, and to preserve human rights and justice in their own [Allied] lands as well as in other lands.”<sup>205</sup> The combined provisions of both declarations limited any concessions to the

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<sup>203</sup>Moshe Gat, “The Soviet Factor in British Policy Towards Italy, 1943-1945,” *The Historian* 50, no. 4 (August 1988): 535, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1988.tb00758.x/abstract> (accessed 24 November 2013).

<sup>204</sup>Lillian Goldman Law Library, “Atlantic Charter,” 14 August 1941, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp> (accessed 1 February 2014), point 8.

<sup>205</sup>United Nations, “Declaration by United Nations (Subscribing to the Principles of the Atlantic Charter, January 1, 1942),” Ibiblio, The Public’s Library and Digital Archive, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420101a.html> (accessed 1 February 2014).

defeated Tripartite Act nations, whose only available alternative was to accept a complete Allied victory.

However, public opinion in the Allied Nations diverged on this topic. In fact, while the United States with its large Italian-American electorate did not see any real advantage in compelling Italy to an unconditional surrender,<sup>206</sup> Great Britain was not willing to endorse any indulgence towards Italy. In September 1943, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had to strongly defend the decision to recognize Italy as cobelligerent before the House of Commons. Churchill acknowledged that Italy became an enemy of the British Empire “when the Italian Fascist Confederacy used its arbitrary power to strike for material gain at falling France” but he argued that cobelligerency would be to Italy “the first of a series of acts of self-redemption”<sup>207</sup>

Despite the Prime Minister’s view, a paper circulated within the British cabinet in July 1944 warned against the second and third order effects of allowing Italy to raise a cobelligerent army. The paper suggested that “we must recognize, however, that such action will give the Italians a greater claim to generosity at the Peace Settlement on the grounds that they have ‘worked their passage home.’”<sup>208</sup> In fact, the authorization for raising a cobelligerent army in Italy would hamper the achievement of the Allied complete victory against an already defeated Italy. Additionally, the Cabinet’s position

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<sup>206</sup>Loi, 8-9.

<sup>207</sup>Churchill, 200.

<sup>208</sup>British Cabinet, paper R11376/G, “Equipment of Italian Divisions,” 21 July 1944, in FO 317-43951.

seemed more in line with Lord Chatfield's<sup>209</sup> view that "the British could re-assert [their] dominance over an inferior [Italian] race."<sup>210</sup>

Besides political considerations, speculations of a more military nature stifled the Allied disposition to exploit Italian support in the conduct of operations. A draft telegram from the British War Office to the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, which addressed the decision to equip some Italian divisions for combat operations, reported that "We [the War Office] do not rate highly value of Italians as fighting troops, and consider the Allied cause is best served by continued employment of maximum numbers on labour and administrative duties."<sup>211</sup> In the same draft document, the equipping of the Italian army was considered secondary to "other high priority commitments such as support of Balkans guerillas."<sup>212</sup> A later document incorporated Mr. Harold Macmillan's<sup>213</sup> advice that "more equipped Italian divisions will correspondingly encourage the Italians"<sup>214</sup> and suggested omitting in the official document the paragraph on the consideration about the Italian fighting value since:

while we certainly agree . . . in not rating the Italian units highly as fighting troops, it would nevertheless in our opinion be a blow to the Italian Government if

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<sup>209</sup>Britain's First Sea Lord in 1935.

<sup>210</sup>Sadkovich, 29.

<sup>211</sup>British Cabinet, paper R10031/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 14 March 1944, in FO 317-43951.

<sup>212</sup>Ibid.

<sup>213</sup>British Minister Resident in the Mediterranean.

<sup>214</sup>British Cabinet, paper R4440/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 19 March 1944, in FO 317-43951.

their modest contribution of fighting troops, which they have always been pressing the Allies to increase, is reduced to nothing.<sup>215</sup>

The War Office document acknowledged the Italian Government's efforts to increase Italian military involvement in the Allied campaign. In the aftermath of the armistice, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, the provisional head of government after the fall of Mussolini's government in July 1943, insistently asked that Italy be allowed to contribute actively to its liberation. In a letter to General Eisenhower, Badoglio asserted that "it is for us, Sir, the highest honour to offer our [Italian] blood to free our country . . . [but] . . . if I am not to receive from you the necessary assistance, I am afraid that I will be able to show you nothing more than my good will."<sup>216</sup> Eisenhower's reply was "very sympathetic to the possibilities that you [Badoglio] enumerated" despite "temporary limitations [that] rule out, for sometime at least, a number of your proposals which otherwise would be very desirable."<sup>217</sup>

In the same period, additional political considerations related to the diffusion of Communism in Italy took the stage, thus making even more difficult the decision to raise an ICA. In May 1944, Mr. Palmiro Togliatti<sup>218</sup> stressed to Sir Noel Charles<sup>219</sup> the

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<sup>215</sup>British Cabinet, paper R4440/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 24 March 1944, in FO 317-43951.

<sup>216</sup>Marshal Badoglio to General Eisenhower, 12 October 1943, in War Office, WO 204-5730, "Italy: Employment of Italian Army Units and Personnel with British Forces," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>217</sup>General Eisenhower to Marshal Badoglio, 28 October 1943, in WO 204-5730.

<sup>218</sup>Deputy to Marshal Badoglio as head of government and secretary of the Italian Communist Party.

<sup>219</sup>British Ambassador to Italy.

importance of increasing the Italian contribution to the Allied war efforts with a volunteer army because “many [Italian] Army and Air Force officers are becoming communists since there is no opening for them” and “the number [of officers becoming communists] is 2,000 a day.”<sup>220</sup> In May 1944, the Allied view was still not to increase the ongoing Italian participation to the campaign other than with the Italian Corps of Liberation also because “the recruits who came forward at the present time would not probably represent the stabler elements in the population and might have received instruction in some political creed which would not be in the interests of good order and military discipline.”<sup>221</sup> More explicitly, the British Foreign Office endorsed Sir Noel Charles’ opinion by suggesting to the British War Office that “one important reason [not to create a cobelligerent army in Italy] from the political point of view seems to us to be that such an army would be very probably dominated by the communists.”<sup>222</sup>

Despite all these discussions, the decision to raise an ICA was based upon more military considerations. A governing factor in the process was the need for manpower to maintain tempo in the advance into Northern Italy. From 1944, the Allies had increased the pace of operations in Europe in order to close the ring around Germany. This made the need for manpower more compelling. In June 1944, Operation Overlord had already diverted seven Allied divisions from Italy to Normandy and an additional seven divisions

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<sup>220</sup>Sir Noel Charles to Foreign Office, R8292, “Signor Togliatti and the Italian Army,” 25 May 1944, in FO 371-43951

<sup>221</sup>Sir Noel Charles to Foreign Office, R8599, “Memorandum by General Browning on the Creation of an Italian Volunteer Army,” 26 May 1944, in FO 371-43951.

<sup>222</sup>Foreign Office to War Office, R8599, “Memorandum by General Browning on the Creation of an Italian Volunteer Army,” 8 June 1944, in FO 371-43951.

(three U.S. and four French)<sup>223</sup> were required for the invasion of Southern France (Operation Anvil) planned for August 1944. At that point, Operation Anvil was seen as an essential complement to the Italian Campaign and to Operation Overlord since the 10 German divisions in Southern France, if not directly attacked, could be moved to either Northern Italy, Northern France, or both.<sup>224</sup>

Therefore, in July 1944, British General Henry Maitland Wilson, Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean, expressed his concerns about the strength of forces in Italy to the British Chiefs of Staff Committee. In his message, General Wilson warned that “in view of the withdrawal of troops for Anvil, it is essential to strengthen the forces in Italy under the command of General Alexander in every possible way.”<sup>225</sup> This was key since in June 1944 the Germans had 22 divisions in Italy, including six *Panzer* or *Panzergranadiere*, and were committing an additional eight divisions.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, General Wilson requested that “the previous decision of the Combined Chiefs of Staff not to issue combat equipment to units of the Italian Army should be reconsidered . . . [since] . . . from recent experience it is clear that the Italian Corps of Liberation is fighting well and that Italian troops can be relied upon to provide a considerable contribution towards the forces of the United Nations actively engaged against the enemy.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>223</sup>Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory. The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 591, 595.

<sup>224</sup>*Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>225</sup>A.F.H.Q. Algiers to Agwar, Etousa, R11376/G, “Equipment of Italian Divisions,” 16 July 1944, in FO 371-43951.

<sup>226</sup>Porch, 661, 591.

<sup>227</sup>*Ibid.*

The British Chiefs of Staff Committee endorsed General Wilson's request and forwarded it to the Joint Staff Mission in Washington, stressing that the British attached such importance to sustaining the Italian offensive that they would be prepared to provide the equipment necessary for three Italian divisions.<sup>228</sup> On the other hand, the British Foreign Office, while acknowledging that the procedure was formally correct, did not appreciate such a military decision with large political implications.<sup>229</sup> The Foreign Office was concerned that such a concession would hamper British dominance over the Italian will. In fact, it suggested directing the Political Intelligence and the News Departments to:

take the line that our [British] agreement to equip further considerable Italian forces as a concession to the Italian Government which we hope will enable them to better work their passage home. It would be important to avoid any suggestion that we had agreed for these measures as a result of pressure from any quarter, and it should be made that the action was taken on our own initiative because it is our policy that Italy should be assisted to take her proper place among the civilized nations.<sup>230</sup>

On 13 August 1944, the Combined Chiefs of Staff formally granted authority to Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy for "three British divisions worth of tpt [transport] and equipment to be issued to six Italian *Gruppo di Combattimenti*."<sup>231</sup> The reason for

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<sup>228</sup>A.M.S.S.O. to J.S.M. Washington, R11376/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 20 July 1944, in FO 371-43951.

<sup>229</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup>Note of S. Williams on R18067/G, "Combat Equipment for the Italian Army," 30 August 1944, in FO 371-43951.

<sup>231</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy to AFHQ G-3, 1701/23/48/G (SD2), "War Establishment—An Italian Combat Group," 29 August 1944, in War Office, WO 204-6667, "Italian Combat groups: Formation, Organization, War Establishment, and Training," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

the proposal of the creation of the Italian combat groups was “to considerably strengthen [sic] the Allied Armies in Italy in their advance from Pisa–Rimini line northwards.”<sup>232</sup> The Allies acknowledged that “certain tasks could profitably be dealt with by Italian gps [Groups] thereby relieving the Allied manpower situation.”<sup>233</sup> More so, the combat groups “are intended, in the first instance, for use in thickening up the defences of army and corps fronts. If, at a later date, it is decided to use them in offence, the proposed organization will have to be reviewed.”<sup>234</sup>

The authorization to create the ICA did not represent the end of all the biases and generalized diffidence towards the Italian military. Analysis of the documents on the raising, training, and employment of the Italian Combat Groups held at the British National Archives<sup>235</sup> shows that the choice to raise a cobelligerent army was more a matter of necessity than a sincere realization that this would help Italy to shape her future as a democratic nation. The strict limitations on and the reluctance to support a major Italian involvement in the Allied war effort hampered from the beginning the instillation of democracy in a country that just exited a 20-year-long dictatorship. In doing so, the Allies actually defeated one of the points of the Atlantic Charter, in which “they [the

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<sup>232</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy to AFHQ G-3, 1701/23/48/G (SD2), “War Establishment—An Italian Combat Group,” 29 August 1944.

<sup>233</sup>Ibid.

<sup>234</sup>Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy to MMIA (and others), 30 July 1944, 1650/50/57/G (SD1), “Formation of Gruppi di Combattimenti,” in WO 204-6667.

<sup>235</sup>The research is based on several folders regarding the Italian combat groups. More details can be found in the bibliography.

Allies] wish to see sovereign rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”<sup>236</sup>

### Allied Military Assistance to the ICA

The military assistance to the Italian army was mainly a British effort, although the United States gave some contribution in terms of clothing, boots, and rations to some auxiliary units directly supporting the American units.<sup>237</sup> While the Allies were able to solve quickly the initial constraints in terms of equipment and resources, the limited amount of time to train the ICA to standard remained a governing factor during the force generation process. In fact, the operational situation in Italy compelled the Allies to thicken rapidly the frontline in the attempt to give the final blow to the German troops retrograding in Central and Northern Italy. Under these circumstances, the high tempo imposed on the force generation process greatly influenced both organizational and training options proposed for the raising of the ICA.

The first dilemma the British had to deal with was the organization of the new combat groups. In July 1944, lack of confidence in the fighting capabilities of Italian troops and the inability of most Italian officers to handle large formations shaped initial ideas of how to organize the Italian Combat Force.<sup>238</sup> In fact, the British initially desired to employ Italian troops by brigade groups with British divisions. The reason behind this

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<sup>236</sup>Lillian Goldman Law Library, “Atlantic Charter,” point 3.

<sup>237</sup>Land Forces Sub-Commission, A.C. (M.M.I.A.), Memorandum, “Future of Italian Army,” 23 July 1945, in War Office, WO 204-1770, “Italian Army: Organization and Training,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>238</sup>This was the actual designation of the Italian Cobelligerent Army within the British military establishment.

idea was that “in the event of an Italian division in the line giving way, the difficulty of restoring the situation would be greater than if it were only a Brigade Group.”<sup>239</sup> Soon after, the British realized that integrating an Italian brigade group in a British division would be problematic since “in a war of movement...difficulties such as signals and reports to rear and flanks; operation orders; artillery . . . support to conform e.g. to a British barrage; contact between British Divisions through an Italian Bde Gp etc are bound to be exacerbated.”<sup>240</sup> Finally, this choice would have quickly led the Italians to realize that their use in brigade groups implied a lack of trust.<sup>241</sup>

Therefore, the final governing policy about the organization of the Italian Combat Force became that “the Gps [Groups] should be prepared for operations in the shortest possible time, and that, therefore, the normal Italian organization should be followed, modified only in so far as the use of British weapons compelled.”<sup>242</sup> Under these circumstances, in order to mitigate the anticipated Italian inability to handle large formations, combat groups maintained the weak and brittle binary structure of the Italian divisions of the Second World War, thus lacking the combat power of an equivalent

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<sup>239</sup>Army Sub Commission, A.C.C., T5/G/29, “Re-grading of C.I.L. with the equipment of 3 British Divisions,” 18 July 1944, in War Office, WO 204-5810, “Corsica: Disposal of Italian Army Equipment by the French,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>240</sup>Ibid.

<sup>241</sup>Ibid.

<sup>242</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy, 1605/50/57/G (SD1), “Report on visit by GSOI (SD1) and G2 (Trg) HQ AAI to 50 and 51 BLU’s, DMT, AFHQ, MMIA, 2 -4 Nov 44,” 8 November 1944, in War Office, WO 204-6668, “Italian Combat Groups: Formation, Organization, War Establishment, and Training,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

British formation. Therefore, while a Second World War British infantry division consisted of nine infantry battalions, one reconnaissance battalion, one machine gun battalion, one engineer battalion, one anti-tank battalion, and three field artillery battalions, an Italian combat group consisted only of six infantry battalions, four field artillery battalions, one antitank battalion, and one engineer battalion.<sup>243</sup>

The difference in terms of strength and composition explains the reason why the Allies were able to generate and sustain six Italian Combat groups from “three British divisions worth of transport and equipment.”<sup>244</sup> Another consideration is that, besides the political reasons not to name the units of the Italian Combat Force as divisions, the actual size and strength of an Italian combat group was not on a par with a British division. Additionally, it is fair to assume that the Allies limited the size of the combat groups also because large formations with limited or no combat experience would dangerously stretch the Allied capability to synchronize the maneuver of multiple units on the battlefield.

To mitigate this risk, the MMIA<sup>245</sup> attached a liaison unit to the headquarters of each command group to act as the channel of communication between the group commander and the Allied headquarters.<sup>246</sup> Such units, called British Liaison Units

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<sup>243</sup>Crapanzano, 28.

<sup>244</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy, 1701/23/48/G (SD2), in WO 204-6667.

<sup>245</sup>Also known as Land Forces Sub-commission.

<sup>246</sup>Land Forces Sub-commission, A.C. (M.M.I.A.) to H.Q. A.A.I., S/G/29/12, “Function of BLUs attached to Italian Combat Groups,” 24 November 1944, in War Office, WO 204-7370, “BLU with Italian Combat Groups: War Establishment, Functions and Miscellaneous Correspondence,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

(BLUs), did not have any official executive role, although in action the higher Allied formations tended to treat the BLUs as the operational headquarters of the combat groups.<sup>247</sup> The three official functions of the BLUs were to assist the Italian staff to understand and comply with Allied instructions, to assist the Allied gaining formation to plan correctly by liaising with it and on behalf of the Italian staff when difficulties arose, and to provide liaison between Italian and other Allied formations.<sup>248</sup> Actually, in the earliest stage of the formation of the combat groups, BLUs' main task was to supervise training and administration while during operations it was to facilitate liaison and communications.<sup>249</sup>

The shift of focus of the BLUs' activity reflects the transfer of authority occurring between the two separate chains of command that controlled the combat groups. Specifically, during the training phase the Italian Combat Force was maintained under the authority of the *Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito* (Royal Italian Army General Staff), which in turn received strict guidance from MMIA. In this phase, MMIA coordinated all the training and administrative requirements concerning the Italian Combat Force while BLUs had only to track and supervise the progress of the assigned combat group. After the training period, each command group was assigned to an Allied corps-level formation. In this phase, *Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito* had very limited to no authority

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<sup>247</sup>53 BLU to Land Forces Sub Commission, A.C. (MMIA), G1-13 "W.E. of BLU to Italian Combat Group," 8 December 1944, in WO 204-7370.

<sup>248</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy to MMIA, 1605/50/57/G (SD1), "Functions of BLUs attached to Italian Combat Groups," 10 November 1944, in WO 204-7370.

<sup>249</sup>53 BLU Land Forces Sub Commission, A.C. (MMIA), G1-13, 8 December 1944, in WO 204-7370.

over the combat groups since Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy<sup>250</sup> took charge of the operational, executive, and policy matters regarding the Italian Combat Force. BLUs fulfilled their task of liaison and communications by reporting directly to Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy, while MMIA attached a liaison officer to each Combat Group to deal with all matters of purely Italian administration, strength and reinforcement, discipline, and conditions of service and welfare.<sup>251</sup>

Despite being complex, the general mechanism and the shift of responsibilities between MMIA and Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy from the training to the operational phase appears rational. In fact, the training phase required strict coordination between the Italian Ministry of War, *Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito*, MMIA, the British Schools in Italy, and the Italian training depots. Under these circumstances, the risk for an operational headquarters such as Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy would be to lose focus on its main requirement to plan and conduct operations for the Italian campaign. Therefore, the Allied effort in getting additional forces in combat required an organization exclusively dedicated to establish, supervise, and adjust a training program capable of making the Italian combat force ready to assume operational roles in the shortest time possible.

Indeed, an analysis of the timeline shows how ambitious the Allied program was. The Allies planned for the combat groups to assume operational roles in the frontline

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<sup>250</sup>It was the highest Allied headquarters in Italy after its transformation from the Fifteenth Army Group.

<sup>251</sup>Allied Forces Headquarters to President, Allied Commission, AG 091.112/119 GCT-O, "Responsibilities of Land Forces Sub-commission (MMIA) to Italian Gruppi," 20 December 1944, in War Office, WO 204-7423, "Italian Combat groups: Organization," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

between November 1944 and January 1945, only four months after the official decision to raise them. Actually, due to the already mentioned initial difficulties, the first combat group came into line in January 1945 and the last in April 1945. During the training phase, the objective was “to fit the Italian Combat Groups to take over a defensive sector on the Italian front at the earliest possible date, and to make them capable of carrying out an active defence, and after experience in that role of participating in attacks in conjunction with Allied troops.”<sup>252</sup>

To make this happen, the training was arranged in a five-phase program progressing gradually from individual to unit level. During the first phase, selected regimental instructors attended branch courses at British schools for a period of two or three weeks. During the second phase, with a duration of one or two weeks, the regimental instructors transferred the knowledge acquired at the British schools within the unit itself. Phase four consisted of technical and individual training on the employment and maintenance of British equipment, while the focus of phase five was on tactical and administrative training of commanders and staff. The last two phases overlapped, with a combined duration between four and five weeks. Phase five was one or two weeks long and provided for collective and tactical training.<sup>253</sup>

Other than the institutional training, the Allies implemented additional solutions to expedite the training effort and obtain reasonable results in the limited available time.

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<sup>252</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ, DMT/55/MT1, “Notes on the Training of Italian Divisions,” 21 September 1944, in War Office, WO 204-7585, “Italian Combat Groups: General Correspondence,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>253</sup>*Ibid.*

During the training phase, Allied Forces Headquarters, Directorate of Military Training provided a training staff of seven elements to the combat group to supplement the training given to Italian instructors in British schools and to supervise and report on the standard of training reached. The training staff was withdrawn as each combat group reached the stage when training could be conducted under BLUs' supervision.<sup>254</sup>

Additionally, the Allies attached for a period of two weeks some Italian officers from the forming combat groups to Allied units engaged in operations. The Allied commanders valued this policy since it "will pay a good dividends both from the point of view of future relations between the two countries and in the fighting which lies ahead."<sup>255</sup>

The Allies made a considerable effort to raise combat-effective units able to operate on the battlefield in accordance with the British practice. The limited time available to generate a combat force of some 55,000 soldiers was a governing factor in many decisions taken about organization and training of the forming units. In fact, the Allies' decision to maintain the binary organization of the Italian divisions meant that combat groups lacked the capacity to maneuver and outflank enemy formations on the battlefield. At the same time, the training was so condensed in time that it was very difficult for soldiers not used to the practice of modern warfare to consolidate information received into actionable knowledge. Allied military assistance was a huge

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<sup>254</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ, DMT/55/MT1, "Notes on the Training of Italian Divisions," 21 September 1944, in WO 204-7585.

<sup>255</sup>Lieutenant General Richard McCreery, Commander, Eighth Army, to Lieutenant General Sir John Harding, Allied Armies in Italy, Chief of the General Staff, DO/BGS/1005A, 23 October 1944, in WO 204-7585.

effort to increase combat effectiveness of the Italian troops, but missed an opportunity to transform the *Regio Esercito* into a modern fighting force.

### Successes and Limitations of Allied Military Assistance to the Italian Combat Force

The process of raising combat-effective units in a short period from an army with limited capabilities like the *Regio Esercito* in mid-1943 was quite ambitious. Most of Italian units either had no combat experience or had not developed a system to learn lessons from the combat experienced. Furthermore, the two armistices (short and long) had a devastating impact on the *Regio Esercito* itself in terms of morale, equipment, and organization. Further complicating the situation, the Allied requirement to get Italian troops into combat as quickly as possible forced training to time and not to standard. Consequently, the force generation process of the Italian combat groups fell short of its own expectations. In fact, despite many undeniable successes, limitations incidental to the training process actually diminished its reach in terms of the capability to generate combat-ready forces.

The first point of success was that Allied military assistance stressed the importance of raising a class of professional officers to lead troops in combat. BLUs and Directorate of Military Training staff experienced first-hand the lack of professional skills of the Italian officer corps of the Second World War. The British identified the main shortfalls of the Italian officer corps in the:

Inability of senior Italian officers to grasp the fundamental defects in their military system . . . failure to delegate authority . . . failure to concentrate supporting arms and administrative resources . . . “rank consciousness.”  
Examples: Senior officers consider it derogatory to take orders from staff officers of a higher formation who are junior to them in rank . . . failure to insist on adequate professional standards . . . failure to insist on compliance with orders . . .

weak power of command of officers . . . the complete absence of a Staff system as understood in the British Army . . . low standard of junior officers.<sup>256</sup>

The Allies actively tackled this shortfall and tried to marginalize its impact on the effectiveness of the units. In April 1945, MMIA published a directive for the training of junior officers up to and including the rank of lieutenant colonel to improve their knowledge of administration and personnel management. The Allies realized that:

The Italian national characteristics as affected by the Fascism do not produce the same relationships between officer and man as is found in the armies of the Democratic nations. For these reason the Italian officer does not understand the necessity of looking after his men, and similarly, the man does not expect it.<sup>257</sup>

The British instructors within the combat groups held two-week long courses with the declared aim of strengthening the bond of loyalty and comradeship between officers, NCOs, and soldiers to enhance unit efficiency.<sup>258</sup> Moreover, to develop senior officers, the Allies intended to attach them to selected British units so they could see for themselves how an efficient staff system worked and how to delegate responsibilities and distribute staff duties.<sup>259</sup> As a last resort in case of non-compliance, MMIA reported to *Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito* that Italian officers demonstrating excessively poor

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<sup>256</sup>56 BLU to MMIA, 1G, "Report on Combat Group Mantova," 29 June 1945, in WO 204-1770.

<sup>257</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to BLUs, DMT/87/MT1, "Man Management," 7 February 1945, in WO 204-7585.

<sup>258</sup>Land Forces Sub Comm A.C. (MMIA) to AFHQ, S/G/15/I, "Improvement of Efficiency Italian Officers," 7 April 1945, in WO 204-1770.

<sup>259</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to BLUs, DMT/87/MT1, "Man Management," 7 February 1945, in WO 204-7585.

control or lack of cooperation should be removed and replaced with more suitable officers.<sup>260</sup>

At the same time, the Allies acknowledged the qualities of Italian soldiers, thus debunking the prejudice of presumed Italian ineptitude. Soldiers were rated as good material, when given proper leadership. Italian troops were not, a British staff report claimed, as intelligent as British soldiers but “the standard of physical endurance and readiness to work long and patiently is certainly as good as with our own men.”<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, Italian soldiers “move across country fast and not stupidly: they show quite a fair knowledge of the use of the ground.”<sup>262</sup>

An additional point of success was the instillation of the concept of welfare within Italian military formations. The Allies held welfare in all its aspects constantly in mind, pressing the Italian War Ministry to improve conditions for soldiers. The Allies specifically trained some Italian officers to address the welfare of the units and, from February 1944, these officers became part of the war establishment of the combat groups. Additionally, the Allied Forces Headquarters encouraged the Italian War Ministry to publish one daily and one weekly newspaper for the troops with a circulation of 60,000 copies. Military personnel could also send radio messages to occupied Italy and could communicate by means of a special service postcard with their families in the most

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<sup>260</sup>Army Sub Commission, A.C.C. (MMIA) to HQ AAI, I/106/1, “Security Intelligence—Monthly report—Italian Army,” 7 July 1944, in WO 204-5810.

<sup>261</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ, DMT/55/12/MT1, “Report on State of Training of Friuli Combat Group as at 20 Nov 44,” 28 November 1944, in War Office, WO 204-7586, “Italian Combat Groups: Friuli and Cremona Groups,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>262</sup>*Ibid.*

recently liberated areas. The Allies also worked with the Italian Welfare Service to create canteens in operational units and establish rest camps for those soldiers whose homes were in enemy occupied territory.<sup>263</sup>

To complement welfare provisions, the Allies implemented a hygiene section in the combat group's war establishment to improve the living conditions and hygienic standards of the soldiers. The hygiene section provided lectures and demonstrations on sanitary matters, making models of latrines, grease traps, and wash benches. Furthermore, the hygiene section built model facilities where unit sanitary squads attended lectures and demonstrations. Additionally, Italian sappers and water duties personnel were trained to establish water points and to sterilize water.<sup>264</sup> This situation constituted a great improvement over the *guerra dei poveri* (war of poverty) that the Italian army fought from 1939 to 1943.

Therefore, the provision of modern equipment and suitable uniforms, coupled with a logistic system of previously unknown efficiency, boosted morale, skill, and confidence among the Italian soldiers. This success must be put into context with the consideration that after September 1943 the determination to liberate Italy from Nazi oppression was by itself a powerful boost for Italian morale and motivation to fight. In fact, Allied sources report that troops of the Italian Corps of Liberation were fighting well

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<sup>263</sup>MMIA, "Italian Combat Force: Memorandum on Manpower," 27 January 1945, in War Office, WO 204-7365, "Italian Combat Groups: Organization, Training, Administration, and Employment," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>264</sup>53 BLU to D.D.M.S., 13 Corps, MED/2, "Medical History of the War-Folgore Gruppo," 9 April 1945, in War Office, WO 204-1557, "53 British Liaison Unit," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

beside the Allies in their advance to Rome and that their morale was very high.<sup>265</sup> It is worth remembering that these units had received very limited support from the Allies and had not gone through any Allied training program.

Besides the points of success, Allied military assistance to the Italian Combat Force experienced many limiting factors that hampered the extent of its effectiveness. First, the basic assumption behind the condensed training timeline was that “Italian officers and men were mostly trained soldiers whose main requirement is re-training in the technical handling and maintenance of new arms, vehicles and equipment.”<sup>266</sup> The Allies were soon to realize that such an assumption was mistaken since the bulk of Italian soldiers were not trained to modern standards and officers had little understanding of maneuver and the implications of mechanization. However, this generalization does not apply to those Italian units that were granted sufficient time and resources to train adequately in preparation for war before 1939.

Since the Allies did not review the training program of the combat groups to mitigate this shortfall, it is fair to assume that the Italian Combat Force was trained to time and not to standard. A report from 53 BLU confirms the view that the British were mainly concerned of the quantity and not the quality of the Italian troops along the frontline:

Were this a British formation, one would regard the possibility of its commitment to battle in the next month or so with considerable apprehension. It was pointed out, however, by General BROWNING [Commander of MMIA] on his recent

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<sup>265</sup>Army Sub Commission, A.C.C. (MMIA) to HQ AAI, I/106/1”Security Intelligence–Monthly report–Italian Army,” 7 July 1944, in WO 204-5810.

<sup>266</sup>Military Mission Italian Army to Heads of Branches and Services, HQ MMIA, T.S./G/29, “Italian Combat Force,” 26 September 1944, in WO 204-6667.

visit that a far lower standard must be accepted; and it is hoped that, in the time remaining, the division will reach a standard adequate for a limited combat role.<sup>267</sup>

Therefore, if on one hand the British criticized the senior Italian officers' attitude that "it will be all right in action,"<sup>268</sup> on the other hand they "take the view that the best course [to address the training problems] will be to get the Group into the line in a quiet sector . . . to let it find its own feet under practical conditions."<sup>269</sup> The training program actually hindered the Royal Italian Army in developing consolidated long-term capabilities and made it difficult to eradicate many Italian officers' idea that training was something optional before combat.

An additional limitation of Allied military assistance was that BLUs did not have any official command role, yet Allied commanders expected BLUs to have a command role within the combat group. Under these circumstances, some might argue that giving a command role to the BLUs would imply a lack of trust in the capabilities of the Italian commander to manage his own unit. Actually, such a provision would have increased the mutual trust between the Italian and the Allied commanders since they would have shared the responsibility for both successes and failures on the battlefield. Therefore, the Italian commander would have had an additional evidence of the soundness of the orders

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<sup>267</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to G3 Trg (Br), AFHQ, DMT/55/12/MT1, "Progress Reports in respect of LEGNANO Group, FOLGORE Group, MANTOVA Group," 25 January 1945, in War Office, WO 204-7588, "Italian Combat Groups: Folgore, Legnano and Mantova Groups," United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>268</sup>50 Brit Liaison Unit to HQ 15 Army Gp (and others), G/6/16, "Training Program and Progress Report," 5 January 1945, in WO 204-7586.

<sup>269</sup>Lieutenant General John Harding to Major General Alfred Maximilian Gruenther, Chief of Staff, 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group, CS/34, 04 Januray 1945, in WO 204-7586.

received while the Allied commander would have been more confident in the perfect execution of those orders. As a matter of fact, BLUs with an unofficial command role actually limited the freedom of action of the Italian commander, thus further limiting the development of his initiative and willingness to assume calculated risks.

Related to this point was the lack of senior Italian officers in Allied higher formations' headquarters. Such a provision would have decisively enhanced the professional development of the Italian officer corps by providing first-hand experience and insight into how to manage large formations. At the same time, they could have acted as liaison officers for the Italian combat groups, thus facilitating and integrating the function of liaison and communications of the BLUs.

Despite a considerable effort, the Allied military assistance to the Italian combat groups fell short of expectations. The status of the Italian army in mid-1943 and the necessity to thicken quickly the frontline drove the choice to train the Italian Combat Force to time and not to standard. However, what the Allied military assistance lacked most was a more comprehensive and structured approach to the project in order to extend the benefits of the Allied efforts on a longer term. Besides these limitations, Allied military assistance achieved many successes in terms of enhancement of welfare, morale, and officers' professional development. These three achievements contributed to strengthen the bond of loyalty and comradeship within the combat groups, thus becoming instrumental in enhancing overall unit efficiency.

## CHAPTER 4

### FRIULI AND FOLGORE OPERATIONS DURING THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN

Exceptional courage, endurance and sacrifice . . . should not be confused with effectiveness in battle.

— Christopher Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience: New Zealand, Australia and the Empire in the First World War*

#### Assessing Combat Effectiveness

The U.S. military defines combat effectiveness as “the ability of a unit to perform its mission.”<sup>270</sup> Within this context, the factors taken into account to assess combat effectiveness are ammunition, personnel, status of fuel, and weapon systems.<sup>271</sup> Despite its clear-cut character, this definition bases the assessment of combat effectiveness exclusively on materiel factors and does not account for intangible ones such as unit cohesion, organizational culture, and leadership. Furthermore, it does not define the context in which combat effectiveness is measured.

In fact, a 1977 research of the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) on U.S. Marine Corps infantry battalions underlines the importance of such a point arguing that:

Combat effectiveness refers to the ability of a unit to accomplish a military mission. As such, combat effectiveness refers to the performance in a hostile

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<sup>270</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 1-02 (FM 101-5-1), *Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 2004), 1-35.

<sup>271</sup>*Ibid.*

environment, as distinguished from the concept of “readiness,” which refers to a state of preparedness prior to entering the hostile environment.<sup>272</sup>

Acknowledging that “there has been virtually no systematic, empirical, research into the ‘combat effectiveness’ of units”<sup>273</sup> in the U.S. military as a whole, DARPA carried out its research by ensuring that “[it] was not focused exclusively on the Marine Corps, but on the general issues of ground combat,” and analyzing 10 cases from the Second World War, five cases from the Korean War, five cases from the Vietnam War, and two cases from special operations in the Dominican Republic and the 1958 Lebanon landings.<sup>274</sup> From an analysis of four critical factors (integration of supporting fires, capability to plan, command, and coordinate, capability to plan and command during an engagement, and coordination functions) capable of determining combat effectiveness,<sup>275</sup> the research identified several variables instrumental in shaping the four critical factors.<sup>276</sup> Such variables were adaptive behavior, maneuver, effective use of nonorganic supporting fires, communications, quality of planning and quality of information, and effective use of armor support.

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<sup>272</sup>Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), *Measurement of Combat Effectiveness in Marine Corps Infantry Battalions, Executive Summary* (Arlington, VA: Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, 1977), Defense Technical Information Center, <http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA049566> (accessed 3 March 2014), 2.

<sup>273</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>275</sup>*Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>276</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

DARPA's research identifies adaptive behavior as the single most important variable and defines it as the ability to recognize a situation on the battlefield and react after an engagement begins. Furthermore, the research identified maneuver as the single most important function for unit success. Following maneuver, communications is the second most important specific function that an infantry unit must perform to succeed in combat. Effective communications maximize the use of supporting fires and facilitate linkages to external units.<sup>277</sup>

The research also pointed out that quality of planning and quality of information were more decisive for combat effectiveness than awareness of enemy capabilities. In fact, the quality of planning was more dependent on a comprehensive knowledge of the entire situation in terms of terrain, weather, enemy, and disposition of own forces rather than solely on knowledge of the enemy situation.<sup>278</sup> Additionally, effective use of armor support served as an "important contributor to combat effectiveness in slightly over one-half of the case studies while logistics support and artillery support were not considered frequent determinants of combat outcome, yet having a positive effect on combat effectiveness."<sup>279</sup>

DARPA's research also disclosed some interesting findings arising from the analysis of historical data. Such findings complemented analysis of the critical factors and provided a broader view of the variables influencing combat effectiveness of a

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<sup>277</sup>DARPA, *Measurement of Combat Effectiveness in Marine Corps Infantry Battalions*, 2.

<sup>278</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

unit.<sup>280</sup> The research showed that “completion of a full cycle of unit training before commitment to a combat environment increases the probability of effective performance” but “neither regimental-level training, division-level training, nor rehearsal for the specific engagements show a positive association with effective combat performance.”<sup>281</sup> These two findings may appear contradictory, but DARPA’s research concluded that “the data suggest that [regimental or division-level training] may detract from [the] probability of satisfactory performance, perhaps by distracting the unit from more fundamental training.”<sup>282</sup>

Furthermore, the research showed that “[l]oss of internal contact among the components of an infantry battalion decreases the probability of satisfactory combat performance.”<sup>283</sup> This last point calls attention to another key factor in determining the combat effectiveness of a military organization, namely unit cohesion. Research at the University of Wollongong, Australia, on the combat effectiveness of Australian and American infantry battalions in Papua New Guinea in 1942-1943 argued that “[i]nfantry combat can only be conducted by groups, such as sections and platoons, which manage

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<sup>280</sup>DARPA, *Measurement of Combat Effectiveness in Marine Corps Infantry Battalions*, 11.

<sup>281</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup>*Ibid.*

the fear and the stresses of the battlefield. Cohesion is the essential element, because without it there is no group at all, only co-located individuals.”<sup>284</sup>

To function as an organized body in combat and accomplish its mission in the face of enemy resistance, any infantry unit “requires a moral attribute called ‘fighting spirit’.”<sup>285</sup> The word moral in the context of the research “refers to individual and collective mental, emotional, and psychological resources, which are intangible.”<sup>286</sup> Therefore, besides the aforementioned materiel and technical factors, University of Wollongong’s research recognizes the influence of intangible factors on the determination of the combat effectiveness of a unit. For the purpose of this thesis, such factors are summarized in unit cohesion, organizational culture, and leadership.

The University of Wollongong’s research claimed that many sociological studies during and after the Second World War had proved that “although there were other factors, cohesion in a small combat group was the vital determinant of the group’s effectiveness because it offset the extreme stress on the individual.”<sup>287</sup> The research mainly relied on the “concepts of the Standard Model of Cohesion outlined by the social psychologist and military sociologist Guy L. Siebold.”<sup>288</sup> In this model, sections/squads

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<sup>284</sup>Bryce Michael Fraser, “The Combat Effectiveness of Australian and American Infantry Battalions in Papua in 1942-1943” (Wollongong, Australia: University of Wollongong, 2013), 3.

<sup>285</sup>Ibid.

<sup>286</sup>Ibid.

<sup>287</sup>Giuseppe Caforio, ed., *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*, quoted in Fraser, 15.

<sup>288</sup>Fraser, 14.

and platoons were considered primary groups because the individuals in them operate with “intimate face to face association and co- operation . . . integrated into the common life and purpose, disciplined by a common spirit”<sup>289</sup> while companies and the battalion were secondary groups.<sup>290</sup>

Siebolds argued that “secondary group cohesion”<sup>291</sup> creates the battalion culture and unit pride based on trustworthy professionalism in carrying out duties and tasks. Primary group cohesion, on the other hand, generates fighting spirit.”<sup>292</sup> When primary and secondary group cohesions combine within a military organization, strong vertical and horizontal bonds characterize that organization.<sup>293</sup> Therefore, while combat effectiveness is instilled in a unit by “impart[ing] military skills to its primary groups through rigorous collective training,”<sup>294</sup> “secondary group cohesion must effectively service the needs of the primary groups for fire support, medical support, weapons, ammunition, rations and other combat equipment.”<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>289</sup>Guy L. Siebold, “Key Questions and Challenges to the Standard Model of Military Group Cohesion,” *Armed Forces and Society* 37, no. 3 (2011): 448-460, 450, note 2, quoted in Fraser, 15.

<sup>290</sup>Fraser, 19.

<sup>291</sup>Siebold defines secondary group the one linking the levels of the army beyond the battalion.

<sup>292</sup>Guy L. Siebold, “The Essence of Military Group Cohesion,” *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 2 (January 2007): 286-295, 286, quoted in Fraser, 22.

<sup>293</sup>Fraser, 15.

<sup>294</sup>Anthony King, “The Existence of Group Cohesion in the Armed Forces. A Response to Guy Siebold,” *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 4 (July 2007): 638-645, 640-642, quoted in Fraser, 22.

<sup>295</sup>Siebold, “The Essence of Military Group Cohesion,” 289, quoted in Fraser, 22.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that a unit achieved combat effectiveness when a commander was able to maintain the momentum of the unit through the application and synchronization on the battlefield of the elements of combat power<sup>296</sup> and the fighting spirit of the unit's primary groups as forged in rigorous collective training. In this context, quality leadership plays a key role in determining both combat readiness and combat effectiveness. In fact, while junior officers and NCOs are central to maintaining cohesion within primary groups,<sup>297</sup> the commanding officer sets the rules and conventions of behavior in the unit and creates its cohesion.<sup>298</sup> These rules and conventions are infused through training and practices, and, once validated through combat, they become a shared part of the organizational culture of the unit.<sup>299</sup> This process requires competent leaders since poor leadership "leads to apathetic performance which cannot be combat effective."<sup>300</sup>

The University of Wollongong's research further expands the analysis of the relationship between primary and secondary groups of the Standard Model as a key factor

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<sup>296</sup>Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* identifies the following elements of combat power: leadership, information, mission command, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2012), 3-1.

<sup>297</sup>Fraser, 19.

<sup>298</sup>Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), quoted in Fraser, 25.

<sup>299</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup>S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: the Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 168, 186, 189, quoted in Fraser, 27.

in the determination of combat effectiveness. The research argues that “[o]nly when both primary group cohesion and secondary group cohesion increase at the same time does a unit move towards combat effectiveness, but sometimes primary and secondary cohesion proceeded at different speeds or directions.”<sup>301</sup> Therefore, the research envisions a more adaptable theoretical model consisting of four different quadrants. A unit might move into one of them during its first combat. The intersection of the axis of primary group cohesion (horizontal) with the axis of secondary group cohesion (vertical) determined the quadrants.<sup>302</sup>

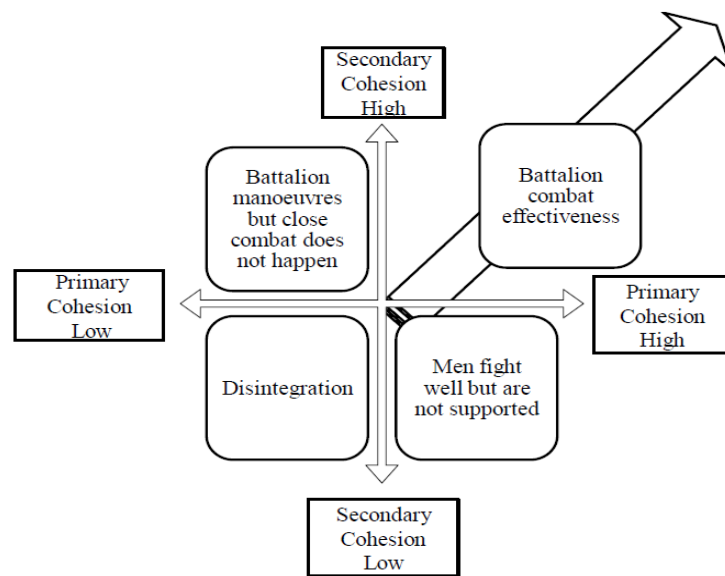


Figure 9. The Adaptable Theoretical Model

*Source:* Bryce Michael Fraser, “The Combat Effectiveness of Australian and American Infantry Battalions in Papua in 1942-1943” (Thesis, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia, 2013), 421. The ideal development of both secondary and primary cohesion is the top right.

<sup>301</sup>Fraser, 416.

<sup>302</sup>Ibid., 415-421.

In the adaptable theoretical model, units in quadrant one (top left) maneuver but close combat does not happen since the primary group lacks the necessary fighting spirit. In quadrant three (bottom right), primary groups fight well but they are not supported with the elements of combat power since low secondary cohesion is not able to sustain and reinforce their fighting spirit. Units in quadrant four (bottom left) collapse during their first combat; units in quadrant two (top right) possess high enough primary group cohesion to engage the enemy in combat while secondary groups support the fighting spirit of the small units. Ideally, a combat effective unit would move into this quadrant during its first combat.<sup>303</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, the combat effectiveness of Friuli and Folgore Combat Groups will be assessed initially through their combat readiness at the end of the training phase. Once committed to combat operations, the combat effectiveness of Friuli and Folgore combat effectiveness will be measured through an analysis of the technical and intangible factors as underlined in the DARPA and University of Wollongong's research. Specifically, the thesis will analyze technical factors such as adaptive behavior, and the quality of planning and quality of information. The ability to establish effective communications with higher headquarters and flanking units will not be assessed since the BLU attached to each Combat Group mainly undertook this function.

Furthermore, the thesis will also consider the University of Wollongong's intangible factors influencing combat effectiveness, namely unit cohesion, organizational culture, and leadership quality. Lastly, the thesis will attempt to place the combat group under examination into one of the Wollongong theory's quadrants, in order to assess how

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<sup>303</sup>Fraser, 420-421.

and if combat groups were able to transition from combat readiness at the end of the training phase to combat effectiveness in a hostile environment.

### Friuli Combat Group

When on 8 September 1943 Marshal Badoglio announced the armistice with the Allies, the Friuli Infantry Division was stationed in Corsica to defend the northern sector of the island against a potential Allied invasion. The reaction to the armistice within Friuli was unanimous as it did not experience any internal disagreement on how to deal with the 5,000 German troops stationed nearby. These troops were part of the German *Sturmbrigade* (assault brigade) *Reichsführer SS*, which was reinforced with two motorized battalions and artillery, air defense and antitank units.<sup>304</sup>

Right after the announcement of the armistice, the German units attacked the Italian military district in Bastia in an attempt to seize the seaport. Headquarters, Seventh Corps, in charge of the defense of the island, tasked two battalions of Friuli Division to move to Bastia in order to counter the German action. The ensuing engagement lasted a few hours and eventually the Friuli battalions were able to repel the Germans. Considering the hostile German attitude, Lieutenant General Giovanni Magli, commander of the Italian military forces in Corsica, ordered Major General Ettore Cotronei, commander of Friuli, to organize three tactical groups to prevent any further German attempt to capture Bastia seaport, clear the area between Bastia and Biguglia of Germans, and maneuver to secure Biguglia airport.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup>Rossi, 7-8.

<sup>305</sup>*Ibid.*

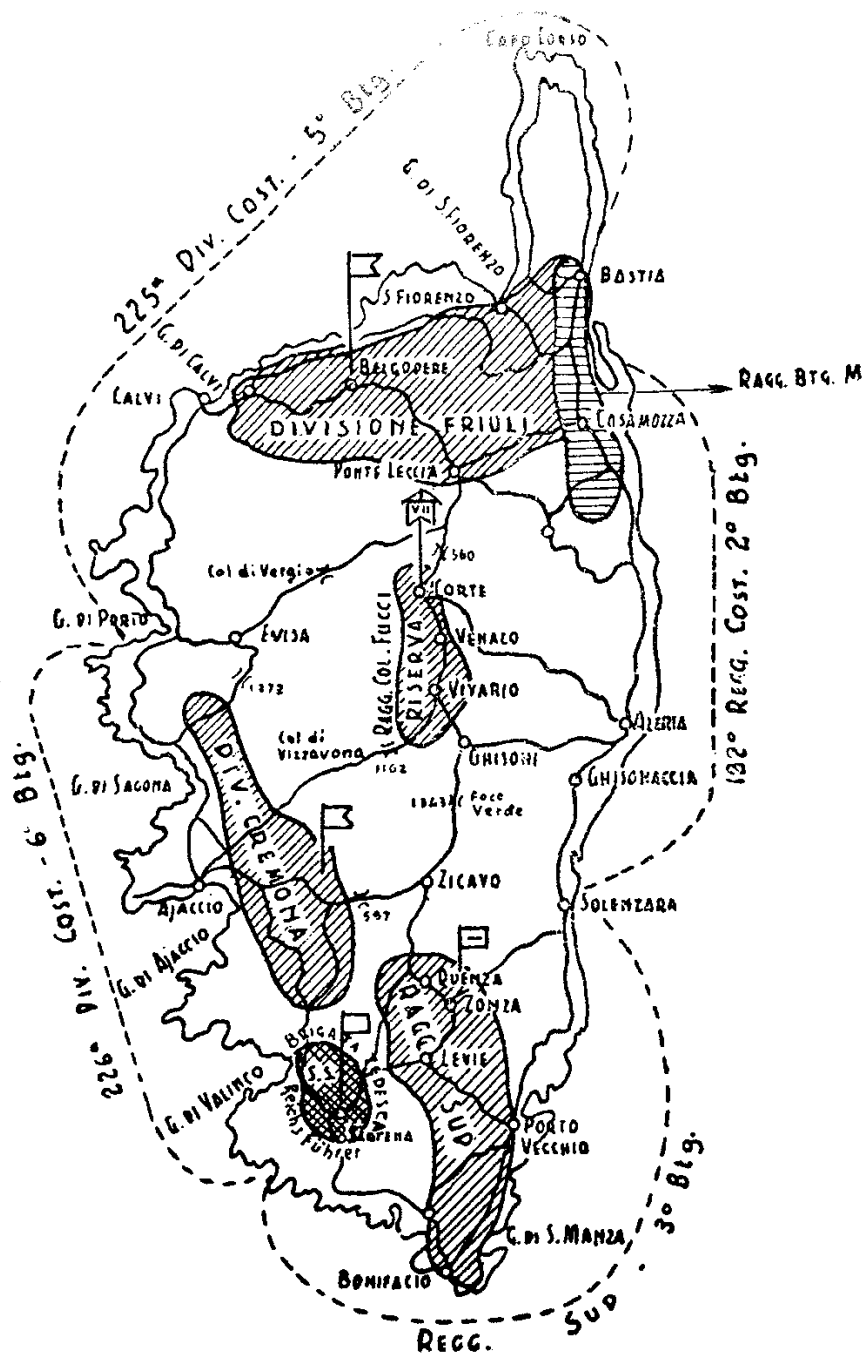


Figure 10. Organization of Italian Troops in Corsica right before the Armistice on 8 September 1943

Source: Romano Rossi, *Il Gruppo di Combattimento Friuli: 1944-1945*, Collana La Storia/Bacchilega (Imola, Italy: Bacchilega, 2009), 7.

On 12 September 1943, despite resistance from Friuli, the Germans were able to gain access to the seaport of Bastia and take control of the route between Bonifacio in southern Corsica and Bastia.<sup>306</sup> During the operation, the German *Reichsführer SS* Brigade benefited from the support of some units of the German Ninetieth *Panzer Grenadier* Division, which had recently arrived from Sardinia. After this major engagement, the German and Italian units in Sardinia transitioned to defense until 26 September.<sup>307</sup>

On 24 September, French troops started to go ashore in Corsica in an attempt to liberate the island. RAGS directed Friuli to support the French operation with two infantry battalions, one mortar battalion, one antitank battalion, one engineer battalion, two artillery regiments, one air defense battery, one flamethrower company, and some combat service support units. French troops on the island consisted of the Fourth Moroccan Mountain Division (with four battalions), one assault battalion, and one additional Moroccan light infantry battalion (*goumiers*).<sup>308</sup>

From 26 September 1943, the combined Italian-French force attacked the German troops defending Bastia and the surrounding area, finally defeating them on 4 October 1943. During its Corsican engagements, Friuli suffered 97 killed in action and 198 wounded in action. On 18 October, Friuli moved to southern Corsica and later to

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<sup>306</sup> Associazione Nazionale Combattenti della Guerra di Liberazione inquadrati nei reparti regolari delle FF.AA., “La Divisione Friuli, Attacca i Tedeschi in Corsica (9 settembre–4 ottobre 1944),” <http://digilander.libero.it/mlodi/> (accessed 17 December 2013), 1-2.

<sup>307</sup> Rossi, 8.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Sardinia. According to orders, Friuli left the French forces all machineguns, artillery pieces, horses and mules, feed and equipment stores along with most of its trucks. Additionally, one infantry battalion and two engineer companies remained in Corsica to fix roads and infrastructure, and to clear minefields.<sup>309</sup>

Once in Sardinia, Friuli reorganized its units to account for the transformation of the Black Shirts legion into the 387th Infantry Regiment, the casualties suffered in Corsica, and some 6,000 of its soldiers posted to southern Italy as agricultural manpower. In July 1944, after eight months in Sardinia and with a remaining strength of only 3,000 troops, Friuli moved to Benevento in southern Italy, where it was reinforced and reorganized to assume the war establishment of a Combat Group.<sup>310</sup> On 10 September 1944 and after the reorganization, RAGS announced the creation of the Friuli Combat Group with two infantry regiments (Eighty-Seventh and Eighty-Eighth with three infantry battalions each), one artillery regiment (Thirty-Fifth with four 87mm groups, one 76mm antitank battalion, and one 40mm air defense group), one engineer battalion (with two combat engineer companies and one signal company), and additional combat service support units.<sup>311</sup>

Friuli Combat Group started its training phase in mid-August 1944 and continued training until January 1945. At the end of November 1944, Friuli Combat Group moved to the vicinity of Radda in Chianti, Tuscany to undertake collective training in preparation for its combat employment in mid-January 1945. On 29 November 1944,

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<sup>309</sup>Rossi, 10.

<sup>310</sup>Ibid., 11, 19.

<sup>311</sup>Crapanzano, 162.

during a meeting held at Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy, 50 BLU<sup>312</sup> assessed the state of training of Friuli Combat Group as “individual and section training is complete. Platoon and company exercises have been carried out with fair success. Each battalion has carried out two battalion exercises. Preliminary organization and execution were weak.”<sup>313</sup>

Two weeks later on 17 December 1944, 50 BLU reported to Headquarters, 15 Army Group that “[p]rogress [in Friuli’s state of training] during period ending 16 Dec[ember] has been exceedingly disappointing in all branches,” and identified the root causes in “complete lack of decentralization at all levels . . . complete resultant failure to accept responsibility at all levels . . . complete resultant lack of initiative at all levels . . . there is little attempt . . . either to enforce obedience to orders or to see that orders are carried out precisely” 50 BLU’s report concluded that “the [Friuli] Division will NOT by Allied standards be fit to take a place in operation in mid January as part of an Allied formation, though I consider that it COULD operate in a semi-independent role as did the CIL<sup>314</sup> under 10 Corps.”<sup>315</sup>

50 BLU suggested that a regimental-level exercise planned from 27 to 30 December 1944 be regarded as a test for the combat readiness of Friuli, where “performances [had] to be judged mainly on results achieved as opposed to procedure

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<sup>312</sup>50 BLU was in charge of Friuli Combat Group’s training.

<sup>313</sup>HQ Allied Armies in Italy to CG Fifth Army (and others), 1 December 1944, 2004/40/G (Trg), “Conference–Trg of FRIULI Combat Gp,” in WO 204-7423.

<sup>314</sup>Corpo Italiano di Liberazione (Italian Corps of Liberation).

<sup>315</sup>50 Brit Liaison Unit to HQ 15 Armt Gp, 17 December 1944, G/6/16, “Training Progress and Progress Report. 50 British Liaison Unit,” in WO 204-7586.

employed.”<sup>316</sup> At the end of the exercise, the Allies were disappointed about the performance by Friuli and realized that:

this [Friuli] Gruppo is not fit to be used in an operational role in other than a purely holding role. It should certainly not be used in an offensive or mobile role. At the same time, I consider it capable of taking over a quiet portion of the line provided certain immediate steps are taken to put right the more glaring faults.<sup>317</sup>

After another exercise carried out from 2 to 5 January 1945, 50 BLU concluded that “no further useful purpose can be attained by a continuance of tactical training,”<sup>318</sup> thus remitting to higher authorities any decision on Friuli Combat Group’s employment in operations. Despite the lack of combat readiness of Friuli, the Allies decided to “[by the end of January] get the [Friuli] Group into the line in a quiet sector under a British formation . . . to let it find its own feet under practical conditions”<sup>319</sup> because “if we go on postponing its initiation into operations we shall never get it going.”<sup>320</sup>

Therefore, we see how, before its commitment to combat operations, Friuli Combat Group was not considered combat ready, and thus lacked the most important prerequisite for combat effectiveness. On 5 February 1945, Friuli Combat Group began

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<sup>316</sup>50 Brit Liaison Unit to HQ 15 Armt Gp, 17 December 1944, 17 December 1944, G/6/16, “Training Progress and Progress Report. 50 British Liaison Unit,” in WO 204-7586.

<sup>317</sup>HQ 15 Army Group, 31 December 1944, 2004/44/G (Trg), “Visit to Exercise carried out by Friuli Group,” in WO 204-7586.

<sup>318</sup>50 Brit Liaison Unit to HQ 15 Army Gp, 5 January 1945, G/6/16, “Training Progress and Progress Report.” in WO 204-7586.

<sup>319</sup>Lieutenant General John Harding to Major General Alfred Maximilian Gruenther, Chief of Staff, 15th Army Group, CS/34, 4 Januray 1945, CS/34, in WO 204-7586.

<sup>320</sup>*Ibid.*

the relief in place of the Polish Fifth Kresowa Division and from 9 February 1945 officially assumed responsibility<sup>321</sup> for what the Allies considered “operationally a quiet sector”<sup>322</sup> near Brisighella (see figure 11). In the meantime, the Allies hoped that Friuli would learn “many necessary lessons . . . before more serious opposition is encountered.”<sup>323</sup>

Friuli Combat Group’s war diary reveals that the unit went through four different phases during its operational employment. The first phase from 5 February 1945 until 19 March 1945 was to “relief in place the Polish units and retain the defensive positions between Sintra Creek and Senio River.”<sup>324</sup> Friuli Combat Group deployed three infantry battalions along an eight-kilometer-long main defensive line (first echelon), an additional battalion (second echelon) five kilometers southeast of the main defensive line, and two infantry battalions in reserve 12 kilometers southeast of the main defensive line. The Group’s headquarters and artillery battalion were located six kilometers southeast of the main defensive line, between the second echelon unit and the reserves.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>321</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, 1 January–28 February 1945, Italian Army Staff Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>322</sup>Land Forces Sub Commission A.C. (M.M.I.A.), “Report N. 15. Activity during the month of February 1945,” in War Office, WO 220-413, “Allied Control Commission Policy of Using Italian Army,” United Kingdom National Archives, London, England.

<sup>323</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup>Friuli Combat Group, Office of the Chief of Staff, 5 February 1945, 219/OP, “Relief in place of Allied units on defensive positions south of Senio River,” in Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, 1 January-28 February 1945.

<sup>325</sup>*Ibid.*

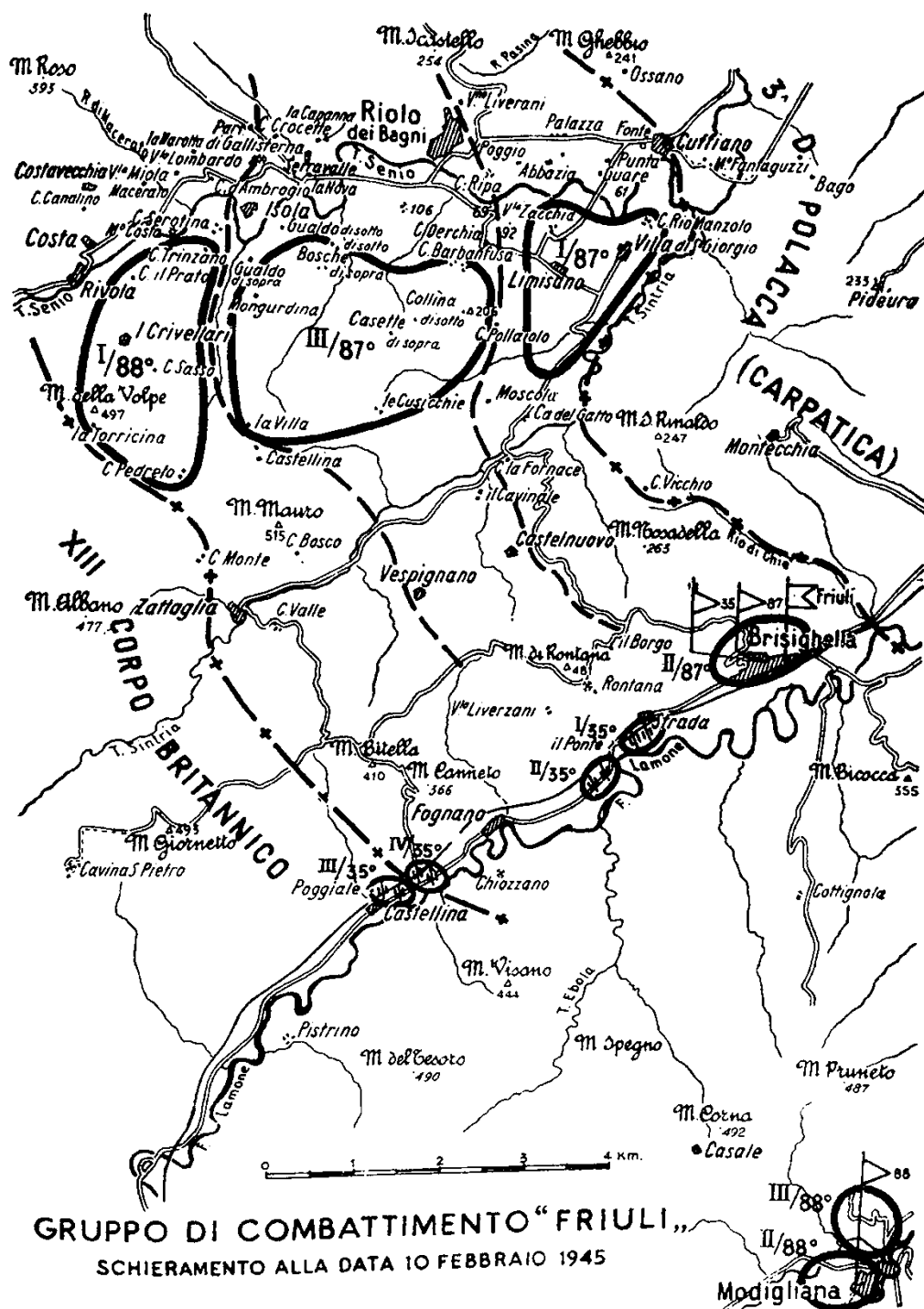


Figure 11. Organization of Friuli Combat Group, 10 February 1945

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 167.

During this phase, Friuli Combat Group intensively patrolled the area north of the main defensive line in order to determine enemy positions south of Senio River. The patrols were small, usually consisting of five to 12 soldiers commanded by an officer.<sup>326</sup> An extensive use of artillery fires counterbalanced this small-unit maneuver. In fact, Friuli Combat Group could count on its organic five artillery battalions and the reinforcement of two British and two Polish artillery battalions.<sup>327</sup> In total, each of the three infantry battalions along the main defensive line could rely upon the support of three artillery battalions. Additionally, from 3 March 1945 the British A squadron, Eight Reconnaissance Regiment, consisting of four platoons equipped with Churchill tanks reinforced Friuli Combat Group.<sup>328</sup>

From 5 February 1945 until 21 March 1945, the most relevant combat action of Friuli Combat Group was the battle for Hill 92. On 14 March 1945, the Germans captured the position through a surprise attack executed during the relief in place of the Italian units defending Hill 92.<sup>329</sup> On 15 March, Friuli Combat Group's commander ordered the commander of the second battalion, 88th Infantry Regiment to attack and regain the lost position. On 16 March after an eight-hour long engagement, Hill 92 was

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<sup>326</sup>As inferred from Friuli Combat Group and 88th Infantry Regiment's war diaries. Sometimes patrols consisted of 25 elements (so called pattuglioni).

<sup>327</sup>Friuli Combat Group, Office of the Chief of Staff, 5 February 1945, 219/OP, "Relief in place of Allied units on defensive positions south of Senio River," in Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, 1 January-28 February 1945.

<sup>328</sup>50 BLU to Friuli Combat Group, 26 February 1945, G/5, "8 Reparto di ricognizione," in Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, 1 January-28 February 1945. Friuli Combat Group was always supported with Allied armored formations since did not have any organic tank unit.

<sup>329</sup>Crapanzano, 174.

again under Italian control.<sup>330</sup> Despite its success, the operation highlighted major shortcomings in Friuli Combat Group's combat effectiveness.

Second battalion, 88th Infantry Regiment, attacked Hill 92 with three *pattuglioni* (large patrols, consisting of some 25 soldiers under the command of an officer) of three different companies (Sixth, Seventh, and Tenth) by exploiting massive artillery support from the organic artillery regiment reinforced with groups of the British First and Second Artillery Regiments and some batteries of the British Seventy-Fifth Artillery Regiment.<sup>331</sup> So, each *pattuglione* could rely on the fire support of at least three artillery groups, making the attack of Hill 92 more a matter of firepower than a matter of maneuver. Despite this, Friuli Combat Group suffered 16 killed in action, 42 wounded in action, and two missing in action (at the end of the attack, 80 percent of the attacking force was a casualty).<sup>332</sup>

Additionally, considering that the Germans suffered 53 casualties (including 11 prisoners of war)<sup>333</sup> and Friuli Combat Group attacked with some 75 troops, the force ratio of 1.4 attackers against one defender does not seem appropriate for a deliberate attack.<sup>334</sup> In this episode, Friuli Combat Group showed poor quality planning and information due to its inability to array forces according to the threat and terrain and

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<sup>330</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945, Italian Army Staff Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>331</sup>Crapanzano, 174.

<sup>332</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>333</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup>In a deliberate attack, the desired force ratio is 3:1.

to follow the basic principles of mass, surprise, and maneuver. Additionally, Friuli demonstrated a limited ability to maneuver and weak adaptive behavior since it was not able to adapt and react quickly to the situation on the ground. On the other hand, Friuli demonstrated high fighting spirit and primary cohesion, while secondary cohesion remained low. In fact, Friuli Combat Group was not able to sustain and reinforce the fighting spirit of its small units by allocating elements of combat power other than fires and did possess unity of command during the action.

The action at Hill 92 illustrates how Friuli Combat Group's combat effectiveness was very low even after a month on the frontline. Most of the shortfalls that emerged during the training phase were still present during combat operations, above all "the determination to use infantry in penny packets in the assault."<sup>335</sup> Such a situation was most likely the result of low vertical bonds within Friuli Combat Group, due to the inability of its commanders at the regimental and combat group level to instill an organizational culture that valued effectiveness in combat more than force protection. In fact, on 6 March 1945 the Allies reported "while [Friuli's] battalion commanders are anxious to act offensively against the enemy, it would seem that higher commanders do not always give full support to this policy as they appear anxious to avoid casualties."<sup>336</sup> Such a statement further supports the view of the lack of internal cohesion within Friuli Combat Group.

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<sup>335</sup>50 BLU to Headquarters, 15th Army Group, 24 December 1944, G/6/16, "Training Progress and Progress Report. 50 British Liaison Unit," in WO 204-7586.

<sup>336</sup>Headquarters, Eighth Army to HQ 15 Army Group, T/8/trg, 6 March 1945, "Report on Gruppo Friuli." in WO 204-7586.

The second phase of Friuli Combat Group's operational employment went from 20 March until 8 April 1945. In this timeframe, the combat group reorganized the defensive sector to account for the new positions assumed south of Senio River and to consolidate the main defensive line one kilometer north of the previous one. Friuli Combat Group's commander positioned another infantry battalion along the main defensive line,<sup>337</sup> thus increasing the density of troops on the frontline. The two reserve infantry battalions now were located six kilometers southeast of the main defensive line, along with the artillery units and the Battle Group's headquarters. Unlike in the previous phase, Friuli Combat Group did not maintain any second echelon units.<sup>338</sup>

In this phase, the most relevant operation that the combat group carried out was Operation *Ischia*, whose purpose was to "establish some advanced combat outposts and gain a position of advantage on the Senio River's southern bank."<sup>339</sup> The operation envisioned a company-level operation (three platoons from Tenth Company and one platoon from Eleventh Company of Eighty-Seventh Infantry Regiment) advancing in three different attack columns to seize eight different objectives.<sup>340</sup> Each platoon was to progress along a pre-determined line of advance (some 1.5 kilometers deep), seize an intermediate objective, and then advance to capture the assigned final objective.

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<sup>337</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>338</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup>Headquarters, 87th Infantry Regiment, 25 March 1945, "Relazione cronologica dello svolgimento dell'azione bellica effettuata dal III btg. del rgt. nella notte del 24-25 c.m.," Annex 18 to Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

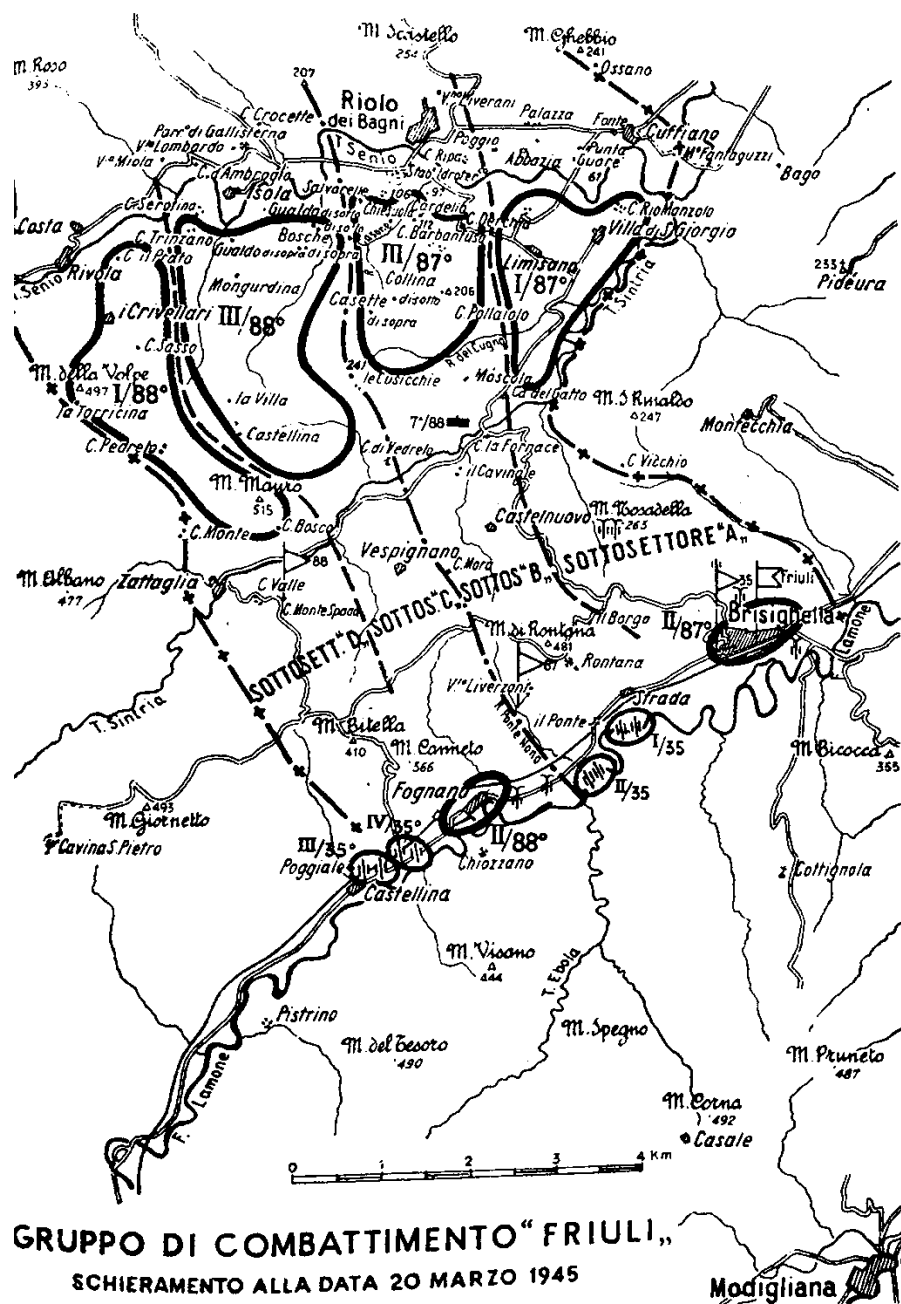


Figure 12. Organization of Friuli Combat Group, 20 March 1945

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 181.

The operation started on the night of 24 March 1945, and Friuli Combat Group was able to achieve all the objectives other than Hill 106.<sup>341</sup> Unlike the other objectives, the platoon attacking Hill 106 encountered enemy resistance, which forced it to quit the attack. Some 25 German troops defended a heavy fortified building on Hill 106 against an attacking force of less than a platoon.<sup>342</sup> On the evening of 25 March, after a heavy artillery bombardment, two platoons renewed the attack on Hill 106, suffering 49 casualties while failing to take the objective.<sup>343</sup>

The action on Hill 106 reinforces the conclusion about the combat effectiveness of Friuli drawn from the action on Hill 92. Leaders demonstrated lack of adaptive behavior and low unit cohesion, since they failed to reinforce the fighting spirit of the small units with adequate elements of combat power. Friuli Combat Group's leadership was probably convinced that artillery fire was more decisive than infantry maneuver in a deliberate attack, thus commanders persevered in committing forces in penny packets against enemy positions.

Quality of planning and quality of information was even poorer than during the action on Hill 92. In fact, during the second attack, Friuli Combat Group had a clear idea of the terrain and the strength of the enemy unit defending Hill 106. Despite this, the combat group committed only two platoons against a German platoon heavily organized in a defensive position, thus realizing a force ratio of only two attackers against one

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<sup>341</sup>Headquarters, 87th Infantry Regiment, 25 March 1945, "Relazione cronologica dello svolgimento dell'azione bellica effettuata dal III btg. del rgt. nella notte del 24-25 c.m.," Annex 18 to Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>342</sup>Ibid.

<sup>343</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

defender. Unlike during the action on Hill 92, Friuli Combat Group gave unity of command to the action since the four platoons were under the command of the Tenth Infantry company commander, who replaced the Twelfth Infantry company commander after he was wounded during the first assault on 25 March 1945.<sup>344</sup>

The third phase of operational employment for Friuli went from 9 April to 11 April 1945. In this phase, the Allies launched the final offensive during the spring of 1945. Accordingly, on 2 April 1945 Friuli Combat Group received the mission to “establish a bridgehead north of Senio River between POGGIO (excluded) and CUFFIANO (included) and retain it for at least twenty-four hours.”<sup>345</sup> The ultimate goal of the operation was to allow follow-on Allied units to execute a forward passage of lines with Friuli and launch an attack deep into the German defensive sector north of Senio River.<sup>346</sup> The planned bridgehead was 1.5 kilometers wide and defended by two German battalions.<sup>347</sup> Friuli Combat Group’s commander ordered the two infantry battalions in reserve to lead the attack, supported by the two infantry battalions defending the eastern section of the main defensive line. Additionally, the commander ordered feint attacks on

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<sup>344</sup>Headquarters, 87th Infantry Regiment, 25 March 1945, “Relazione cronologica dello svolgimento dell’azione bellica effettuata dal III btg. del rgt. nella notte del 24-25 c.m.,” Annex 18 to Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>345</sup>Friuli Combat Group, Office of the Chief of Staff, 2 April 1945, 126/R.P., “Costituzione di una testa di ponte oltre il T. Senio,” Annex 36 to Friuli Combat Group War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>346</sup>Crapanzano, 183.

<sup>347</sup>Ibid., 185.



The operation was codenamed *Pasqua* (Easter) and launched on 10 April 1945. The attacking battalions organized in two attack columns, reinforced with engineer units and Sherman tanks. Other than the four organic artillery battalions, Friuli received support from three battalions of the British Second Artillery Regiment and three battalions from the British Seventy-Fifth Artillery Regiment,<sup>349</sup> thus realizing a ratio of five artillery battalion for each attacking infantry battalion.<sup>350</sup> Despite the heavy artillery preparation fire and the feint attacks in the western sectors, the attack was repelled and Friuli suffered 248 casualties (including 74 killed in action).<sup>351</sup> During the night of 10-11 April 1945, due to the successful Allied offensive along the whole front of the Eight Corps, the German troops defending north of Senio River retrograded and broke contact with Friuli Combat Group.<sup>352</sup>

The aforementioned shortcomings in terms of poor quality of planning and information, scarce ability to maneuver, and low unity cohesion plagued Operation *Pasqua*. Friuli Combat Group's commander committed the two battalions in reserve to lead the attack and did not replace them. Poor quality of information did not provide for an adequate force ratio for the attack, eventually resulting in a one-to-one confrontation.

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<sup>349</sup>Crapanzano, 185-186.

<sup>350</sup>This does not account for the two supporting infantry battalions, which actually did not play any specific role into the operation.

<sup>351</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

<sup>352</sup>Friuli Combat Group, Office of the Chief of Staff, 10 April 1945, 1004/OP, “Predisposizioni per un eventuale movimento in Avanti,” Annex 39 to Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945; Friuli Combat Group, Office of the Chief of Staff, 11 April 1945, 1007/OP, “Movimento in Avanti dell’ I.C.G. Friuli,” Annex 40 to Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945.

Additionally, Friuli Combat Group persevered in relying on heavy fire support to counterbalance the inability to maneuver, committing five artillery battalions for each attacking infantry battalion. Fires and some protection were the only element of combat power that higher echelons provided to the attacking formations, confirming the low unit cohesion and the inability of the combat group to sustain and reinforce the fighting spirit of the small units. In short, Operation *Pasqua* reinforces the view that Friuli Combat Group was committed to operations without having achieved the required combat effectiveness.

The fourth and last phase of Friuli Combat Group's operational employment lasted from 12 April to 23 April 1945. On that date, after entering Bologna on 21 April 1945 with some Polish troops, Friuli moved into the Eight Corps rear area to reorganize. From 12 to 21 April 1945, Friuli Combat Group advanced some 40 kilometers in pursuit of German troops retrograding into the Po valley. During its advance, Friuli Combat Group encountered only weak resistance posed by the German rearguard. The only significant engagement occurred between 18 and 19 April 1945 in Casalecchio de' Conti, where Friuli crashed into a strong German position.<sup>353</sup> Friuli attacked and conquered the position with an infantry battalion supported by seven artillery battalions,<sup>354</sup> eventually suffering 7 killed in action, 32 wounded in action, and 3 missing in action.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup>The operation will be analyzed in more details in the next section since Folgore Combat Group was operating on the left flank of Friuli Combat Group to seize Case Grizzano.

<sup>354</sup>Crapanzano, 218-219.

<sup>355</sup>Friuli Combat Group, War Diary, March–April 1945. In the same action, Friuli Combat Group captured 25 German prisoners of war.

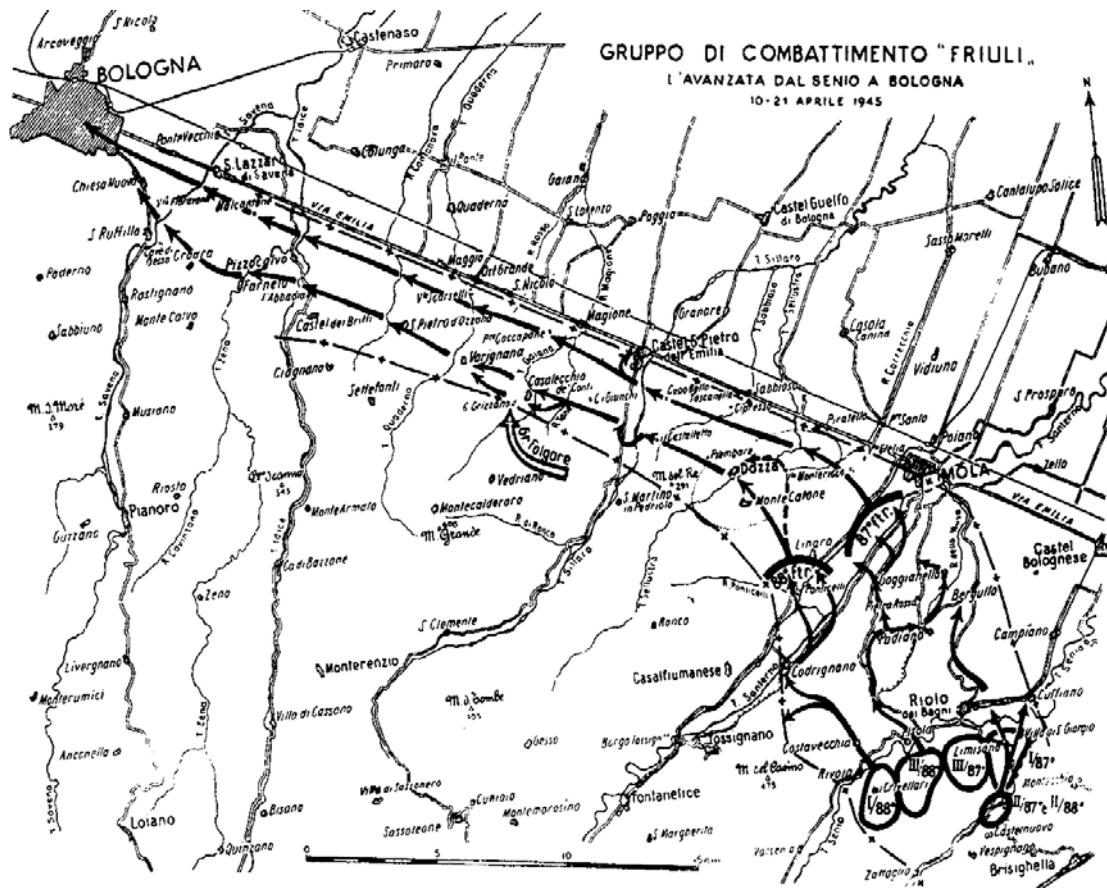


Figure 14. Friuli Combat Group's Advance towards Bologna, 10-21 April 1945

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 223.

In sum, the three months of Friuli Combat Group's operational employment reveals that in April 1945 the unit was still far from combat effective. Although at Hill 92 on 16 March 1945 the Combat Group was able to achieve its mission, the success should be credited to what some German prisoners of war defined an "infernal and disheartening" artillery fire.<sup>356</sup> In the other episodes, the extensive use of fires could not

<sup>356</sup>Crapanzano, 175.

help Friuli in achieving the assigned mission. In mid-April 1945, Friuli Combat Group was able to force Senio River and advance towards Bologna exploiting the retrograde of the German units more than its combat effectiveness. This does not mean that the soldiers in Friuli lacked fighting spirit. In fact, small units at the squad and platoon level, sometimes also at the company level, showed high fighting spirit and were able to withstand German counterattacks.

The main shortcoming in the combat effectiveness of Friuli was an organizational culture that valued force protection more than effectiveness in combat. Due to this, the leaders of Friuli committed units to attack piecemeal and in penny packets, thus suffering more casualties than necessary. The lack of adaptive behavior and the poor quality of planning and information further worsened the situation. In fact, commanders also proved unable to adapt appropriately the planned course of action according to changing conditions on the ground.

The British committed Friuli Combat Group to combat operations when they knew it was not combat ready, so that after a month on the frontline it was considered “the most backward of the Gruppi under command Eighth Army.”<sup>357</sup> While the training period between August 1944 and January 1945 was useful and served to increase the fighting spirit of small units, it failed to change the organizational culture and improve the quality of leadership. The achievement of this last goal requires an amount of time that measured in decades and not in months.

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<sup>357</sup>Headquarters, Eighth Army to HQ 15 Army Group, T/8/trg, 6 March 1945, “Report on Gruppo Friuli,” in WO 204-7586.

Considering its performance during the Italian campaign, Friuli Combat Group appears to be a unit with high primary cohesion and low secondary cohesion. This classifies Friuli in quadrant three of the adaptable theoretical model of combat effectiveness from the University of Wollongong's research, where men fight well but they are not supported. The root cause of the failure in instilling combat effectiveness in Friuli Combat Group was the Allied haste in selecting the first Combat Group to train and the limited amount of time dedicated to the training itself. In fact, "FRIULI was indicated as the first Group because it was the most readily available" although "[it] was concentrated more as a collection of bodies rather than a fully organized Division."<sup>358</sup> Thus, transforming a collection of bodies into a combat-effective division-level unit in five months of training appears quite an ambitious goal.

#### Folgore Combat Group

To some extent, Nembo 184th Airborne Division's history is more troubled than that of Folgore. The bulk of the division experienced first-hand the struggles of the armistice period while its units were scattered in different locations in Sardinia. Simultaneously, 185th Regiment was fighting beside the German Twenty-Ninth *Panzergranadier* (mechanized infantry) Division in Calabria against Canadian and British forces. Furthermore, in Sardinia like in North Africa, Italian airborne troops had to fight against an invisible enemy. While in Egypt and Libya some 30 percent of Folgore

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<sup>358</sup>Military Mission Italian Army to D.M.T., 15 October 1944, TS/G/29 "Italian Gruppi," in WO 204-6668.

paratroopers died of dysentery, in Sardinia 30 percent of Nembo paratroopers died of malaria, which consistently reduced its combat capabilities.<sup>359</sup>

Upon its arrival in Sardinia, Nembo Division arranged five different tactical groups to defend airports and potential sea-landing zones. Nembo underwent an intense training phase with the German Ninetieth *Panzergranadier* Division, since both units had concurrent tasks on the island.<sup>360</sup> The cooperation with the German units created such close bonds that many Nembo paratroopers saw the armistice of 8 September 1943 as an act of betrayal, and thus decided to fight beside them. This was the case for most of the Twelfth Battalion and one artillery battery from 184th Regiment, which, totaling 600 paratroopers, followed the Ninetieth *Panzergranadier* Division during its retrograde to Corsica. In Calabria, the third battalion of 185th Regiment joined the German Twenty-Ninth *Panzergranadier* Division during its march to Salerno while the Eleventh Battalion assembled on the spot, waiting for the situation to clarify. During the march to Salerno, Ninth Company/Third Battalion/185th Regiment, under the command of Captain Carlo Gay, detached from the battalion's main body to support the Allies, later becoming the bulk of F Recce Squadron.<sup>361</sup>

The armistice was devastating for the morale of the paratroopers of Nembo, which had a dramatic impact on the discipline and cohesion of the unit. Due to the increasing internal unrest and discipline issue, RAGS did not employ Nembo to stop or

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<sup>359</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, "La Divisione Nembo in Sardegna (giugno 1943–Maggio 1944), <http://www.nembo.info/Nembo/Guerra/Sardegna.htm> (accessed 14 December 2013).

<sup>360</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>361</sup>Arena, *Pagine Militari. Vol. 17, Nembo!*, 45-46.

delay the German retreat from Sardinia.<sup>362</sup> The paratroopers from Nembo were unwilling to accept the political and military situation arising from the armistice. After 38 months of war fought in harsh and desperate conditions, some of the paratroopers from Nembo believed that Italy and Italian soldiers did not deserve such a mortifying finale.<sup>363</sup>

Italian Thirteenth Corps, the territorial headquarters in charge of Sardinia, put Nembo Division under strict control. Some 1,600 paratroopers belonging to the divisional combat service support units were moved to other divisions, the division's deputy commander was placed under arrest along with eight officers and many NCOs and enlistees. Some 600 paratroopers assessed as not politically trustworthy were concentrated in a camp and placed under surveillance. An additional 410 were expelled from the branch, and 300 others were moved to other infantry units, while maintaining the airborne qualification.<sup>364</sup>

Despite the internal struggle, the paratroopers from Nembo were the best trained soldiers that Italy could employ to expedite the Allied war effort during the Italian Campaign. In November 1943, the Eleventh Battalion moved from Calabria to Apulia, where it reorganized and trained, thus becoming 185th Airborne Battalion Nembo. In January 1944, 185th Battalion joined the First Motorized Group, the first Italian unit authorized by the Allies to assume a combat role. Until April 1944, 185th Battalion

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<sup>362</sup>Arena, *Pagine Militari. Vol. 17, Nembo!*, 47.

<sup>363</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>364</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

deployed to the Mainarde mountainous area in southern and central Italy, distinguishing itself during the Mount Marrone battle on 31 March 1944.<sup>365</sup>

In the meantime, in Sardinia between January and March 1944, Nembo Division reorganized and conducted divisional maneuvers in anticipation of potential employment beside the Allies.<sup>366</sup> In April 1944, the division moved to southern Italy to join the Italian Liberation Corps.<sup>367</sup> Before joining the Italian Liberation Corps, Nembo division absorbed 185th Battalion from the First Motorized Group.<sup>368</sup> The division now consisted of 183rd and 184th Airborne Infantry Regiments (with two battalions each), 184th Airborne Artillery Regiment, 184th Airborne Combat Engineer Battalion, Fifth Airborne Antitank Battalion, one airborne mortar company, and other minor combat support and combat service support units.

From April to September 1944, under the British Fifth Corps, Nembo fought along the Adriatic coastline to breach the German defensive *Gustav* Line, clearing several villages during its advance. On 9 June 1944, Nembo occupied Chieti, which was the first Italian provincial capital freed by Italian troops. At the beginning of July 1944 and

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<sup>365</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, “Il CLXXXV battaglione paracadutisti NEMBO nelle operazioni con il I raggruppamento motorizzato (gennaio–aprile 1944),” [http://www.nembo.info/Nembo/Guerra/nuova\\_pagina\\_8.htm](http://www.nembo.info/Nembo/Guerra/nuova_pagina_8.htm) (accessed 15 December 2013).

<sup>366</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, “La Divisione NEMBO in Sardegna (giugno 1943–marzo 1944),” <http://www.nembo.info/Nembo/Guerra/Sardegna.htm> (accessed 15 December 2013).

<sup>367</sup>The Italian Liberation Corps was an expansion of the First Motorized Group and consisted of two Italian divisions (Nembo and Utili), for a total of some 22,000 troops.

<sup>368</sup>Associazione Nazionale Nembo, “La Divisione NEMBO.”

despite unfavorable terrain and force ratios, Nembo Division, operating under the Second Polish Corps, conquered Filottrano, a decisive point along the way to Ancona. In the battle of Filottrano, Nembo suffered 59 killed in action and 231 wounded in action, and was instrumental in sustaining the Allied advance along the peninsula. After a short reorganization in the rear area, the division continued its advance to the north until 24 September 1944, when it was disbanded to form Folgore Combat Group.<sup>369</sup>

In September 1944, Folgore Combat Group assumed the new war establishment with two infantry regiments (Nembo and San Marco with three infantry battalions each), one artillery regiment (Folgore with four 87mm battalions, one 76mm antitank battalion, and one 40mm air defense battalion), one engineer battalion (Folgore with two combat engineer companies and one signal company), and additional combat service support units.<sup>370</sup> Nembo Infantry Regiment consisted mainly of veterans of Nembo Division that had fought in the Italian Liberation Corps. San Marco was a marine regiment, whose only two battalions were combat-experienced<sup>371</sup> while the third battalion Caorle was created from scratch with new complements.<sup>372</sup> Therefore, after the reorganization, Folgore Combat Group was a patchwork unit, consisting of personnel from different services and with diverse levels of combat experience. Nevertheless, the leadership was very effective

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<sup>369</sup>Arena, *Pagine Militari*. Vol. 17, *Nembo!*

<sup>370</sup>Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945,” March-May 1945, Italian Army Staff Historic Office, Rome, Italy.

<sup>371</sup>They had fought with the Italian Liberation Corps.

<sup>372</sup>Crapanzano, 240.

in fostering cohesion within the unit, and paratroopers and marines facilitated this process thanks to their natural inclination to team spirit<sup>373</sup> as part of their organizational culture.

Simultaneously, in mid-September 1944 Folgore Combat Group began its training phase among many difficulties but with a strong determination to return to the battlefield. In this initial phase, Folgore Combat Group lacked vehicles, equipment, weapons, uniforms, boots, tents and almost everything else necessary to operate. Even the combat group's headquarters was initially located in a private house and later a farmhouse.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, Folgore Combat Group could not begin officer and NCO training on the British technical and tactical procedures since RAGS had not yet translated the British doctrine into Italian. To solve the problem and expedite the training process, combat group's headquarters, supported by the 53 BLU, translated the most important tactical directives for the employment of the units up to battalion and the manuals of the main weapon systems.<sup>375</sup>

Folgore Combat Group was very determined to meet the date of mid-March 1945 scheduled for its return to the battlefield. However, in mid-November 1944, Folgore Combat Group still lacked training equipment, such as two- and three-inch mortars, compasses, binoculars, directors, and watches.<sup>376</sup> Additionally, the combat group received "Grade III Battle-dress . . . [but] . . . this is extremely poor, holes repaired with

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<sup>373</sup>Crapanzano, 240.

<sup>374</sup>Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945."

<sup>375</sup>Ibid.

<sup>376</sup>The Combat Group had just received rifles and machineguns.

white cotton patches, odd sleeves, cut down trousers and even in one or two cases covered with blood. No doubt the worst was shown . . . and [this] has had a lamentable morale effect on the Group.”<sup>377</sup> Regarding combat boots, the “[f]irst lot (10,000) received were 75% re-conditioned. Most of these were unfit for issue having large slashes in the uppers, no heels etc.”<sup>378</sup> At the end of November 1944, most of the equipment-related issues were solved and Folgore Combat Group could begin the general training phase.<sup>379</sup>

During this phase, the soldiers were “quick to adapt themselves to British weapons, and results on the open ranges have been completely satisfactory.”<sup>380</sup> The British training team created two demonstration platoons (one per regiment) in the hope that “section and platoon training will be speeded up by demonstration rather than by lectures”<sup>381</sup> In mid-December 1944, the Allies affirmed that “[t]raining is continuing satisfactorily . . . and weapon-training is now fairly advanced.”<sup>382</sup> Furthermore, the Allies declared the two demonstration platoons a success since “[they] work with great keenness.”<sup>383</sup> In Folgore Combat Group, observers noted that “training is generally

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<sup>377</sup>Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy, 21 November 1944, 2004/39/G (Trg), “Report of Visit to Italian Combat Gps,” in WO 204-6668.

<sup>378</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to HQ AAI, 29 November 1944, DMT/55/12/MT1, “Progress Report on Trg of Folgore Combat Gp as at 24 Nov 44,” in WO 204-7588.

<sup>380</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup>Appendix A to 53 BLU Letter (ref. G2-21 of 11 December 1944), “Report on infantry trg of the FOLGORE Div as on 10 Dec. 44,” in WO 204-7588.

<sup>383</sup>*Ibid.*

regarded, as is so often in British units, as a necessary evil.”<sup>384</sup> Conversely, the Allies reported that “senior staff officers appear in many cases to have [been] selected for qualities other than knowledge, drive, and clear-headedness” while “junior officers tend to be more ornamental than useful, though they are intelligent if properly directed.”<sup>385</sup> Despite this and thanks to new junior officers just graduated from the British Junior Leader Course as well as an on-going lecture program, junior officers became more willing to accept fatigue and discomfort along with the soldiers.<sup>386</sup>

In January 1945, the British training team realized that “Nembo regiment is fortunate in having an exceptionally good commander and Brigade Major” while “San Marco staff are decidedly amateurish.”<sup>387</sup> The training team overhauled San Marco Regiment to raise it to the standards of Nembo. In addition, Folgore Combat Group’s commander, Brigadier General Giorgio Morigi, forced the San Marco Regiment’s staff to recognize that training was both valuable and to be performed to standard.<sup>388</sup> To reinforce this view of organizational culture, “Gen. MORIGI himself has been out frequently to see training and exercises, visits which have on occasions produced strong comment, both

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<sup>384</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ, 2 January 1945, DMT/55/12/MT1, “Italian Groups–Training Progress Reports,” in WO 204-7588.

<sup>385</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup>*Ibid.* The report analyzes the general situation of Folgore Combat Group, with no difference between Nembo and San Marco regiment. It is fair to assume that such a statement might be related to San Marco regiment, since Nembo’s officers were used to sharing discomfort and fatigue with their subordinates.

<sup>387</sup>Appendix A to 53 BLU Letter (ref. G2-34 of 10 January 1945), “Progress Report on infantry trg of the FOLGORE Div as on 10 Jan. 45,” in WO 204-7588.

<sup>388</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to G-3 trg (Br), AFHQ, 1 February 1945, DMT/55/12/MT1, “Progress Reports,” in WO 204-7588.

verbal and written, favourable and unfavourable, by the General to commanders concerned.”<sup>389</sup>

In mid-January 1945, Folgore Combat Group moved near Ascoli to get closer to the frontline and undertake collective training in preparation for its operational employment. Despite severe weather conditions, Folgore Combat Group was still able successfully to complete all scheduled company and battalion-level exercises.<sup>390</sup> At the beginning of February 1945, the Allies concluded that “[Folgore] Group is now at the top of its form and eager and ready to go back into action.”<sup>391</sup> The Allies were so satisfied with Folgore Combat Group’s performance that they moved forward the date for its commitment into combat by 15 days.<sup>392</sup>

At the end of the training phase, Folgore Combat Group was able to achieve combat readiness thanks to the decisive action of the staff and the unquestioned commitment of the British 53 BLU and the training team from the Directorate of Military Training. Morigi’s attitude was paramount in enforcing an organizational culture that valued training and unit cohesion. Furthermore, the commander’s presence and battlefield circulation enforced strong vertical bonds while severe and accurate training fostered a high fighting spirit within small units.

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<sup>389</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ, 1 February 1945, DMT/55/12/MT1, “Progress Reports,” in WO 204-7588.

<sup>390</sup>Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945.”

<sup>391</sup>Land Forces Sub Commission A.C. (M.M.I.A.), “Report No. 15—Activities during the month of FEBRUARY 1945.” in WO 220-413.

<sup>392</sup>Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945.”

Morigi and the British training team recognized early on the weaknesses of the Combat Group and focused their efforts to improve San Marco Regiment's combat readiness before its operational employment. Thanks to these efforts, even the inexperienced Caorle Battalion was able to achieve a high level of combat readiness so that it was considered "very tough, better than Bafile and Grado battalions."<sup>393</sup> Therefore, the training phase was the key in determining Folgore Combat Group's cohesion, thus transforming the original patchwork unit in an organized, coherent, and combat-ready force.

Folgore Combat Group started to move to the frontline on 27 February 1945, with the task to "take over [a] sector of front now held by 6 BRIT ARMD DIV" no later than 3 March.<sup>394</sup> Squadron 14/20 Hussars (less two troops), two field artillery groups, one heavy anti-aircraft regiment, one light anti-aircraft regiment, one Royal Air Force flight, and two sections of a searchlight battery supported the Group.<sup>395</sup> Folgore deployed Nembo Regiment in the Santerno Valley sector (left) with two battalions as the first defensive echelon and one battalion in the rear area. San Marco Regiment deployed into the Senio Valley sector with the same organization as Nembo Regiment. Each regiment received direct support from two artillery battalions and one engineer company, while British

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<sup>393</sup>General Staff of the Italian Royal Army, Operation Office, 28 December 1944, 13412/OP, "Situazione dei Gruppi di Combattimento." Bafile and Grado were the first two combat-experienced battalions of San Marco regiment.

<sup>394</sup>53 BLU Operation Order No. 4 on 23 February 1945, Annex 12 to Folgore Combat Group War Diary, "Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945."

<sup>395</sup>*Ibid.*

artillery provided general support.<sup>396</sup> Due to the wideness (9.5 km) and physical separation of the two sectors, the combat group's deputy commander was in charge of the Senio Valley sector (San Marco Regiment), while the Combat Group's commander looked after the Santerno Valley Sector (Nembo Regiment).<sup>397</sup>

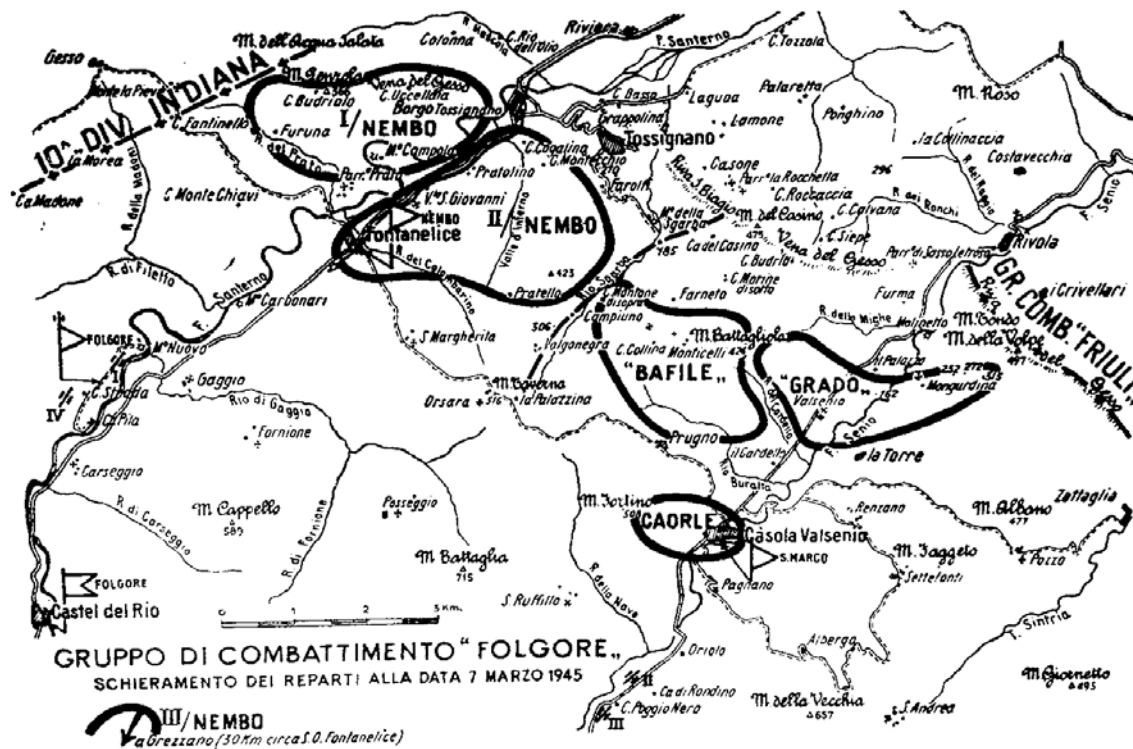


Figure 15. Folgore Combat Group's Organization, 7 March 1945

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 249.

<sup>396</sup>Folgore Combat Group, 24 February 1945, 151/OP, "Trasferimento del gruppo di combattimento nella zona d'impiego," Annex 14 to Folgore Combat Group War Diary, "Sintesi attività dal 24-9-1944 al 28-2-1945."

<sup>397</sup>Crapanzano, 246.

The initial organization shows how Folgore Combat Group's commander focused on sustaining the fighting spirit of his subordinate units by decentralizing most of the available elements of combat power. The two regiments had two artillery groups each in direct support (fires) and one engineer company (protection), and each regimental sector was under the direct command of either combat group's commander or deputy commander (mission command). Additionally, logistic support balanced between the two sectors (sustainment), each being self-sustainable in terms of supply, medical, transportation, and maintenance. Lastly, units arrayed in proper density (two infantry battalions) with one battalion in the rear area acting as a sector reserve (movement and maneuver). The combat group's commander retained the capability to influence maneuver in both sectors through direct control of the British tank squadron and supporting artillery.

On 3 March 1945, Folgore Combat Group completed the relief in place of the Sixth Armored Division and assumed complete responsibility for the sector. During the first week, Folgore Combat Group conducted an intensive program of patrols to acquire information about the enemy. The German 334th Infantry Division (six infantry battalions, of whom two near Tossignano) opposed the Combat Group.<sup>398</sup> The combat group's patrols were very aggressive, and many of them counterattacked German patrols even if confronting an unfavorable force ratio.<sup>399</sup> Furthermore, Folgore set up ambush positions along routes used by German patrols to disrupt enemy reconnaissance.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>398</sup>Crapanzano, 250-251.

<sup>399</sup>*Ibid.*, 254-255.

<sup>400</sup>Annex 10 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "Marzo 1945."

On 11 March 1945, Thirteenth Corps headquarters directed Folgore to “prepare a plan to capture and hold TOSSIGNANO 0823 and the VENA DEL GESSO escarpment EAST of TOSSIGNANO,”<sup>401</sup> with a target date “at three day notice from 29 March, i.e., NOT before 1 April.”<sup>402</sup> On 17 March 1945, Folgore forwarded a detailed plan for the attack on Tossignano to the corps headquarters that contained different options according to the likely enemy courses of action.<sup>403</sup> In the worst-case scenario, the enemy would pose heavy resistance with all the available forces in the area.<sup>404</sup> In this case, the commander of Folgore envisioned an operation characterized by “great violence concentrated in time and space,”<sup>405</sup> with two battalions reinforced with one mortar company and one infantry company attacking abreast from different directions. Another battalion reinforced with one antitank company and all the tracked platoons of the combat group would closely support the advanced battalions.<sup>406</sup> In case of the enemy breaking contact, the rear battalion was to pursue to destroy as many enemy forces as possible.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> 13 Corps to 53 BLU for COMD FOLGORE GRUPPO, 11 March 1945, 5533/2/G, “Planning Note No. 1,” Annex 25 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Marzo 1945.”

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Folgore Combat Group to 13 Corps, 17 March 1945, 371/OP, “Piano Operativo n 1,” Annex 37 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Marzo 1945.”

<sup>404</sup> As already mentioned, the Germans maintained two battalions in Tossignano, though not at full strength. Crapanzano, 251.

<sup>405</sup> Folgore Combat Group to 13 Corps, 17 March 1945, 371/OP, “Piano Operativo n 1,” Annex 37 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Marzo 1945.”

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Folgore Combat Group to 13 Corps, 17 March 1945, 371/OP, “Piano Operativo n 1,” Annex 37 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Marzo 1945.”

Although this operation was not executed, the plan reveals a lot about Folgore Combat Group's quality of planning and information. The plan contained different options according to expected enemy reactions and contained the necessary flexibility to deal with any situation arising on the battlefield. Even the force ratio was adequately calculated, with almost four friendly battalions<sup>408</sup> attacking two depleted enemy battalions. In this case, maneuver and fires were quite well balanced, with seven artillery battalions supporting the attacking infantry battalions. Additionally, the plan conceived of maneuver at a battalion/regiment level, demonstrating high secondary cohesion within the combat group.

After the cancellation of the operation on Tossignano, on 13 March 1945, Folgore Combat Group received a warning order to "relieve 10 IND DIV of the two right battalions sectors"<sup>409</sup> in order to allow Thirteen Corps "[in case] the enemy is found to be weakening or thinning out . . . to attack from the left sector."<sup>410</sup> On 30 March 1945, Folgore Combat Group issued an operation order for the relief in place of the Indian battalions,<sup>411</sup> thus expanding its frontline to 13 kilometers.

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<sup>408</sup>Considering also the reinforcing units.

<sup>409</sup>13 Corps to 53 BLU for COMD FOLGORE GRUPPO, 13 March 1945, 5533/2/G "Planning Note No. 2," Annex 29 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "Marzo 1945."

<sup>410</sup>Ibid.

<sup>411</sup>Folgore Combat Group to subordinate units, 30 March 1945, 534/OP, "Piano operativo n. 2," Annex 83 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "Marzo 1945." 2 Highland Light Infantry was already in the Ten Indian Division sector and was not relieved.

To achieve a sufficient density of troops on the frontline, Folgore Combat Group deployed one additional battalion along the main defensive line and maintained only one battalion in reserve. In addition, it received the support of the British 2 Highland Light Infantry Battalion, which covered the central part of the defensive sector.<sup>412</sup> This was an unusual situation since, as seen in a previous chapter, the British were reluctant to combine British and Italian formations below the divisional level due to the interoperability issues between them. Despite this, Thirteen Corps did not hesitate to attach 2 Highland Light Infantry Battalion to Folgore Combat Group, demonstrating the regard in which the British held Folgore.

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<sup>412</sup>Ibid.

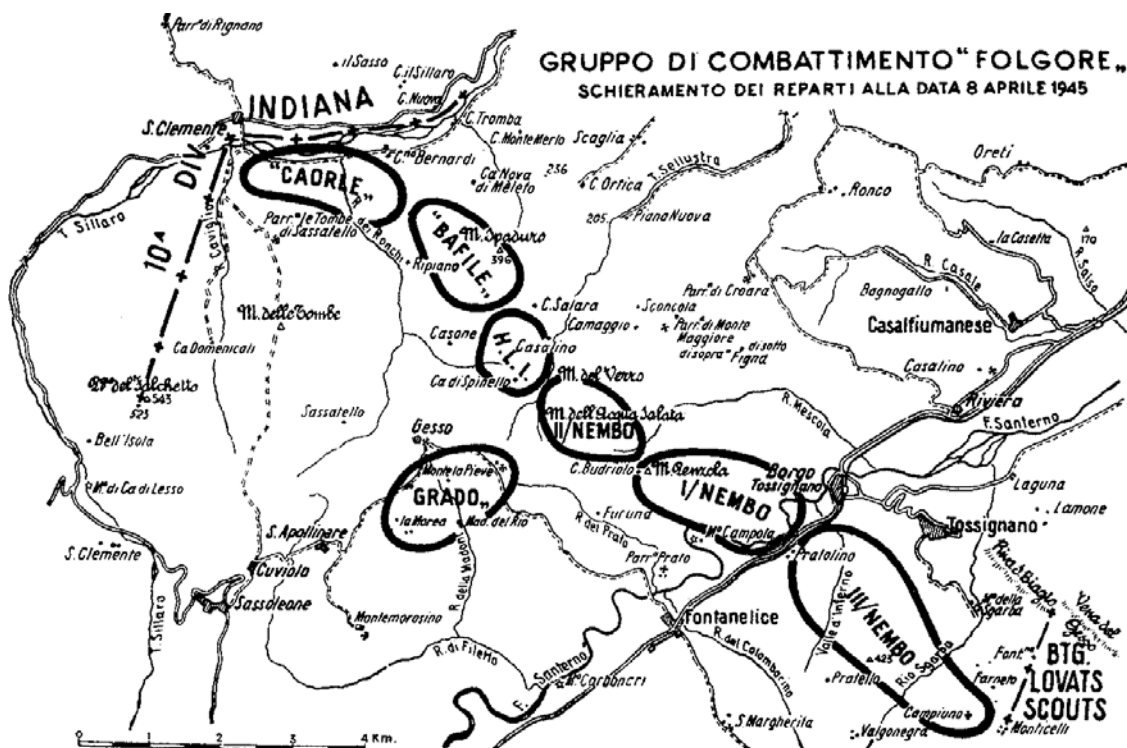


Figure 16. Folgore Combat Group's Organization, 8 April 1945

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli, Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 263.

Folgore completed the relief in place of the Indian battalions on 08 April 1945.<sup>413</sup> On the night of 11 April 1945, Folgore Combat Group's patrols area entered Tossignano and noticed that the Germans were retreating from the position.<sup>414</sup> Quickly, the Combat Group's commander ordered Nembo Regiment to push a company forward to secure Tossignano and pushed some reinforced patrols along the main roads near the village to

<sup>413</sup>Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "Aprile 1945."

<sup>414</sup>Ibid.

maintain contact with the enemy.<sup>415</sup> Additionally, on the morning of 12 April 1945, he directed Folgore and San Marco Regiments to pursue the retreating German units with one battalion each, while maintaining contact with flanking units and control of key terrain in the rear area with the remaining two battalions.<sup>416</sup> This highly adaptive behavior allowed Folgore to seize and maintain the initiative over the enemy while committing considerable forces in the pursuit and retaining freedom of movement in the rear area.

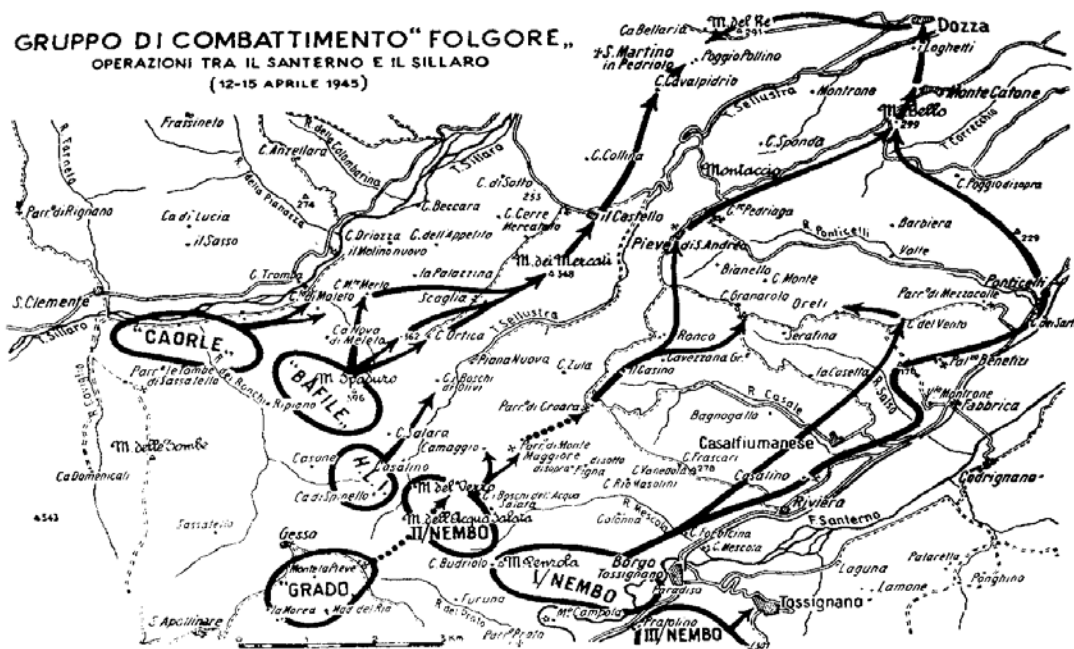


Figure 17. Friuli Combat Group's Advance between Santerno and Sillaro Rivers, 12-15 April 1945

*Source:* Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli,*

<sup>415</sup>Crapanzano, 271-272.

<sup>416</sup>Folgore Combat Group to subordinate units, 12 April 1945, 689/OP, “Avanzata a cavallo della Val Sallustra,” Annex 43 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Aprile 1945.”

*Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 277.

During the pursuit, Folgore Combat Group fought boldly to “crush the resistance opposed by the German delaying elements”<sup>417</sup> in order to maintain contact with the bulk of the retreating enemy forces. Folgore kept up with the retreating enemy units, advancing some 14 kilometers in six days. On 19 April 1945, the combat group reached Grizzano, a small village on high terrain defended by a German paratrooper company.<sup>418</sup> This was a key position on the way to Bologna and had a dominating position on Casalecchio de' Conti, an objective that Friuli Combat Group unsuccessfully attacked the day before.



Figure 18. Terrain Sketch of Case Grizzano and Casalecchio de Conti

Source: Salvatore Ernesto Crapanzano, *I Gruppi di Combattimento: Cremona, Friuli,*

<sup>417</sup>Folgore Combat Group to subordinate units, 12 April 1945, 689/OP, “Avanzata a cavallo della Val Sallustra,” Annex 43 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “Aprile 1945.”

<sup>418</sup>Crapanzano, 294.

*Folgore, Legnano, Mantova, Piceno, 1944-1945* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2010), 217.

After detailed coordination with Friuli Combat Group, on 19 April 1945, one battalion from Nembo Regiment attacked Grizzano<sup>419</sup> while a second battalion assumed a support by fire position on its left flank. Two artillery battalions supported the action while simultaneously Friuli Combat Group executed a concurrent attack on Casalecchio de' Conti. The attack surprised the Germans and an Italian company was able to enter Grizzano and seize most of the village.<sup>420</sup> The Germans counterattacked five times with two companies but Nembo units reinforced the position and repelled the German attacks.<sup>421</sup> At the end of the day, Grizzano was under the control of Folgore and the German paratroopers left the area.

During the battle of Grizzano, Nembo suffered 33 killed in action and 52 wounded in action while the Germans suffered some 50 killed in action, more than 60 wounded in action, and 11 prisoners of war.<sup>422</sup> The Allies praised the bravery and boldness of the Italian paratroopers. The commander of Nembo Regiment's Second Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Izzo, was awarded the United States Distinguished Service Cross "for extraordinary heroism in connection with military

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<sup>419</sup>Due to the minefields and the restrictive terrain, the battalion attacked with one company with the other companies with follow and support tasks. Crapanzano, 296.

<sup>420</sup>Crapanzano, 296-297.

<sup>421</sup>"Final report on Folgore, Combat Group's action during the final offensive of the Allied Armies in Italy" 31-32, in Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "May 1945."

<sup>422</sup>*Ibid.*

operations against an armed enemy,”<sup>423</sup> being the only Italian in history to receive the award. Nembo Regiment’s action at Grizzano demonstrated its high quality planning and information, being able to adapt its attack to the features of the terrain and to the expected enemy reaction. Additionally, the Combat Group’s adaptive behavior was the key in seizing the initiative from the enemy and defeating enemy counterattacks.

On 21 April 1945, Folgore Combat Group was directed to move to the area to rest and reorganize. The unit did not see any further combat action because on 2 May 1945 German forces in Italy surrendered, thus ending the Italian Campaign. Folgore entered its operational deployment as a combat-ready formation. Capabilities acquired during the training phase were essential in transforming its combat readiness into combat effectiveness. Lieutenant Colonel Brooks, 53 BLU’s commander, recognized its success: “All the BLU officers are proud of the successes of the Combat Group and I am willing to believe that we have been a little bit useful in allowing the Combat Group to achieve its current *efficienza bellica* (combat effectiveness).”<sup>424</sup>

This success rested upon both the combat experience gained while fighting under the Italian Liberation Corps and, in the case of Nembo Regiment, the intensive training sustained before the war. The training under British supervision in 1944 reinforced the unit’s strengths and addressed its weaknesses, exploiting an organizational culture that valued training as a prerequisite to achieve combat effectiveness. The decisive and

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<sup>423</sup>MilitaryTimes Hall of Valor, “Giuseppe Izzo,” Military Times, <http://projects.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=31478> (accessed 9 April 2014).

<sup>424</sup>Personal letter from Lieutenant Colonel Brooks to Folgore Combat Group Commander, Annex 105 bis to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, “April 1945.”

focused action of the combat group's leadership was paramount in strengthening vertical bonds within the unit, thus achieving the unit cohesion that Friuli Combat Group lacked. Thanks to this, Folgore Combat Group was able to maneuver at the battalion/regiment level and achieved decisive results against enemy formations while limiting its own casualties.

The high unit cohesion was the direct result of the ability of the combat group to develop simultaneously primary cohesion through an intensive and focused training and secondary cohesion through commanders' presence and battlefield circulation. Brigadier General Morigi used any occasion to get close to the troops in combat, observe their behavior, and provide praise, advice, or reprimands.<sup>425</sup> Folgore Combat Group was able to sustain the fighting spirit of its small units by accurately allocating the available combat power, while its quality of planning and information allowed the combat group to adapt and deal with unexpected situations on the battlefield.

Considering the performance of Folgore during the Italian Campaign, it is fair to consider the combat group a combat effective unit. In this case, the British were successful in instilling combat effectiveness since Folgore was postured to achieve combat readiness in a short amount of time due to its previous combat experience and a robust and effective organizational culture. Under these circumstances, Folgore Combat Group was set for success and provided an effective contribution to the Allied war effort.

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<sup>425</sup>Folgore Combat Group to Subordinate Units, 14 April 1945, 726/OP, "Sfruttamento del successo," Annex 66 to Folgore Combat Group, War Diary, "April 1945."

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

. . . arguably, the most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern their own countries.

— U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates,  
*Security Force Assistance Handbook*

#### Summary and Main Findings

Objectively assessing the overall performance of the *Regio Esercito* during the Second World War is anything but easy. In fact, a common bias regarding the supposed cowardice and lack of fighting spirit of the Italian soldier obscures the root causes of the inadequate performance of most of the Italian army between 1939 and 1943. On the eve of the Second World War, the Italian army was under resourced in terms of equipment and manpower, had a First World War force structure, and received little attention from a political establishment that considered the needs of the navy and air force more compelling.<sup>426</sup> The Italian army was simply unprepared for war.

The American historian Williamson Murray points to organizational factors that prevented the Italian army from achieving combat-effectiveness during the Second World War. These factors are: unsuitable doctrine, poor training, an inability to learn from defeat,<sup>427</sup> inadequate tactics, and an officer corps short on mutual trust.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup>Millett, 108.

<sup>427</sup>Murray, 285-298.

<sup>428</sup>Millett and Murray, 162-163.

This broad picture of Italian combat ineffectiveness during the Second World War does not capture the complex reality of the Italian army in 1943. In fact, while the bulk of Italian divisions could not stand against their Allied counterparts, the few Italian units that were prepared for the Second World War with adequate training, highly selective personnel, inspiring leadership, and sound tactics performed at least as well as Allied formations. This was the case for Folgore and Nembo Airborne Divisions, the former considered the only Italian ground unit in the Second World War that entered combat as well prepared as corresponding American and British units.<sup>429</sup>

On 8 September 1943, Italy requested an armistice from the Allies in an effort to end the war and rid the nation of the Fascists that had declared it without adequate preparation.<sup>430</sup> At the same time, Italian authorities insistently asked the Allies to be allowed to contribute actively and militarily to the liberation of the national soil.<sup>431</sup> Initially, the Allies declined the offer. The desperate condition of the Italian army in 1943 was not the only factor that prevented the Allies from authorizing the employment the Italian military in the fight against the Germans. In fact, the British and the Americans had contrasting views about how to deal with a defeated Italy after the signature of the short armistice on 8 September 1943. While the British believed that allowing Italy to fight the Germans would compromise the goal of complete Allied victory because Italian

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<sup>429</sup>Knox, 144.

<sup>430</sup>Biribicchi, 91.

<sup>431</sup>Marshal Badoglio to General Eisenhower, 12 October 1943, in WO 204-5730.

participation would warrant more generous peace terms,<sup>432</sup> the Americans held the view that the Allies needed to exploit all the support the Italians were able to provide.<sup>433</sup> Not until June 1944 did the British converge on the American position. The British realized that Italian military support would be instrumental in relieving the shortage of manpower due to the redeployment from Italy of a total of 14 Allied divisions for Operation Overlord in Normandy and Operation Anvil in Southern France.

The combination of the poor status of the *Regio Esercito* in 1943-1944 and the Allies' uncertain policy towards the Italian army had a major impact on the outcome of the Allied military assistance provided to the Italian army. When in July 1944 the Allies took the decision to raise the ICA, time pressured both the design of the training program and the timeline for committing the newly formed combat groups to action. The necessity to raise combat units in the shortest amount of time possible had detrimental consequences on the process of instilling combat effectiveness in the ICA.

First, in the selection of which Italian units to train, the British chose the most readily available rather than the most effective, thus failing to recognize the relevance of the background of the combat groups in terms of previous training and operational employment. The effect of this decision was predictable. While the veteran Folgore Combat Group was quick to achieve combat readiness and then combat effectiveness, the more ordinary Friuli Combat Group was committed to combat operations despite the fact

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<sup>432</sup>British Cabinet, paper R11376/G, "Equipment of Italian Divisions," 21 July 1944, in FO 317-43951.

<sup>433</sup>Loi, 24-25.

that 50 BLU had concluded that “no further useful purpose can be attained by a continuance of tactical training.”<sup>434</sup>

Second, the British did not realize that the capability gaps in the selected Italian formations could not be corrected primarily through material factors, but only through a longer-term commitment to address their organizational failures. The main organizational shortcomings of Friuli Combat Group were poor leadership, low cohesion, and an organizational culture that did not value training. These could not be corrected quickly. While a combat group gained familiarity with British equipment and procedures during the five-month long training program, deeper pre-existing organizational shortcomings remained.

Third, the British drafted a rigid training schedule that did not account for the progress of the combat groups towards combat readiness. For example, the British trained Friuli Combat Group to time and not to standard because of the pressing need for troops at the front. The same rigidity characterized the training program. In October 1944, the Allied Forces Headquarters, Directorate of Military Training warned Headquarters, Military Mission Italian Army and the BLUs that “it is possible that the German Army in ITALY may disintegrate and begin fighting as guerillas.”<sup>435</sup> Therefore, this point “should be borne in mind in designing the [Combat Groups’] training program . . . [since] if such a thing were to happen the Italian Divisions at present being trained might be called upon to take part in mopping up operations against isolated

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<sup>434</sup>50 Brit Liaison Unit to HQ 15 Army Gp, 5 January 1945, G/6/16, “Training Progress and Progress Report. 50 British Liaison Unit,” in WO 204-7586.

<sup>435</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to BLUs, 13 October 1944, 2004/39, “Training Programs.” in WO 204-7585.

pockets of [German] resistance.”<sup>436</sup> Despite the Directorate of Military Training’s suggestion, there is no evidence that the BLUs adapted training to include counter-guerilla warfare.

Fourth, the Allies did not design the combat groups’ organization to take into account the full set of tasks that the combat groups would execute once committed to combat operations. In July 1944, the Allies stated that combat groups “are intended, in the first instance, for use in thickening up the defences of army and corps fronts. If, at a later date, it is decided to use them in offence, the proposed organization will have to be reviewed.”<sup>437</sup> The combat groups took part in the Allied spring offensive of 1945, but the Allies never reviewed their organization. Again, the results were predictable.

Although Allied Corps Headquarters usually detached tank and artillery units to facilitate the maneuver of the combat groups, the groups essentially maintained their pre-war binary (two infantry regiment) organization. This severely hampered the ability to execute flank attacks against major enemy formations,<sup>438</sup> thus restricting the form of maneuver used to a frontal attack. Taking into account the combat groups’ organization,

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<sup>436</sup>Directorate of Military Training, AFHQ to BLUs, 13 October 1944, 2004/39, “Training Programs.” in WO 204-7585.

<sup>437</sup>Headquarters, Allied Armies in Italy to MMIA (and others), 30 July 1944, 1650/50/57/G (SD1), “Formation of Gruppi di Combattimenti,” in WO 204-6667.

<sup>438</sup>As per Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 2013), 1-22, a flank attack against an enemy formation requires the organization of the unit in a fixing force, an attacking force, and a reserve. The binary organization does not facilitate this form of maneuver due to the impossibility to mass combat power against the enemy flank while retaining the freedom of action granted by the fixing force and the reserve.

flank attacks could only be executed in local and limited engagements against enemy formations not larger than two battalions.<sup>439</sup>

To conclude, if on one hand Allied military assistance to the ICA achieved the goals of improving officership, welfare, and equipment within the combat groups, on the other, the aforementioned mistakes made the Allied military assistance effort fall short of expectations. In fact, the most relevant factor in the achievement of combat effectiveness was the combat groups' background rather than the military assistance provided. The combat-experienced and well-trained Folgore Combat Group in its short operational employment demonstrated good quality of planning and information, fighting spirit, high cohesion, and excellent leadership. Predictably, the more ordinary Friuli Combat Group demonstrated high primary cohesion within its small units, but was not able to achieve combat effectiveness due to the lack of secondary cohesion. Such a shortcoming could not be overcome in the short amount of time that the Allies allotted to the training of the combat group, thus fatally compromising the process of instilling combat effectiveness.

### A Look to the Present

The Allied experience with the Italian combat groups during the Second World War has some implications for contemporary planners and policy makers of SFA operations. U.S. military doctrine defines SFA as “unified action”<sup>440</sup> to generate, employ,

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<sup>439</sup>As per Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2014), 9-20, the desired force ratio for an attack is three (attackers) to one (defender). Therefore, the six infantry battalions within the Combat Groups could not engage more than two enemy battalions at a time.

<sup>440</sup>“Unified action synchronizes, coordinates, and/or integrates joint, single-Service, and multinational operations with the operations of other U.S. government

and sustain local, host nation, or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority.”<sup>441</sup> SFA’s focus is “on preparing FSF [Foreign Security Forces] to combat lawlessness, subversion, insurgency, and terrorism from internal threats . . . [and] to defend against external threats and to perform as part of an international coalition as well.”<sup>442</sup> The end state of a SFA operation envisions foreign security forces that are “legitimate, credible, competent, capable, committed, and confident.”<sup>443</sup>

SFA operations are relevant today because, from the Second World War on, “the majority of deployments . . . have been with U.S. Military Forces serving as part of multinational operations or in a bilateral arrangement with another country desiring to strengthen its national security. Security Force Assistance has been a part of many of these efforts.”<sup>444</sup> Therefore, while SFA was an additional duty for the U.S. Army in the past, today it is a core competency.<sup>445</sup> Additionally, the U.S. *National Defense Strategy* of 2012 envisions SFA as one of the primary missions of the U.S. Armed Forces for the

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departments and agencies, nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the United Nations), and the private sector to achieve unity of effort.” Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 25 March 2013), VI-32.

<sup>441</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Publication (JP) 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 12 July 2010), VI-32.

<sup>442</sup>*Ibid.*, VI-31.

<sup>443</sup>HQDA, FM 3-07.1, 2-2.

<sup>444</sup>U.S. Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance (JCISFA), *Security Force Assistance Handbook* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: JCISFA, June 2012), I-1–I-2.

<sup>445</sup>HQDA, FM 3-07.1, foreword.

foreseeable future within the framework of the counter terrorism and irregular warfare operations.<sup>446</sup>

The leading U.S. publications on SFA are the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Publication 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense*, the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, and the Department of the Army Field Manual 3-07.1, *Security Force Assistance*.<sup>447</sup> These three publications recognize that SFA success is based upon six imperatives in the planning and execution of operations. The six imperatives are: understand the operational environment, provide effective leadership, build legitimacy, manage information, ensure unity of effort and purpose, and sustain the effort.<sup>448</sup>

SFA imperatives are the result of historical analysis integrated with recent experience and are not intended to replace the principles of war.<sup>449</sup> At the same time, current doctrine recognizes that, while the application of these principles is not by itself a guarantee of success, “if ignored, they virtually guarantee failure.”<sup>450</sup> The thesis focused on these broad principles rather than detailed instructions on how to conduct SFA operations because “the six imperatives apply to SFA at every level of war, for any

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<sup>446</sup>Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2012), 4.

<sup>447</sup>The thesis analyzes only unclassified publications.

<sup>448</sup>JCS, JP 3-22, VI-33; JCISFA, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, VI-1–VI-2; HQDA, FM 3-07.1, 2-1–2-2.

<sup>449</sup>HQDA, FM 3-07.1, 2-1.

<sup>450</sup>JCISFA, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, VI-1.

echelon, and for any Soldier.”<sup>451</sup> Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze SFA practices at the tactical level. However, an analysis of the SFA imperatives *vis-à-vis* the Allied experience with the ICA provides contemporary planners and policy makers with additional perspectives and criteria to consider. More specifically, the Allied experience reveals some points that potentially affect four of the six current SFA imperatives—namely understand the operational environment, provide effective leadership, manage information, and ensure unity of effort and purpose.

Understanding the operational environment is the first SFA imperative. It requires planners to have an in-depth understanding of the operational environment, to include the available local national forces, the enemy, and the human geography of the area.<sup>452</sup> It is of paramount importance to understand the status of the foreign security forces in terms of readiness, equipment available, and level of primary and secondary cohesion. This is especially true when SFA occurs at the end of a conflict and there is fear of lengthy U.S. commitment in a foreign country. The corresponding desire to transition responsibility for security to the host nation as quickly as possible may force operational planners to select the most readily available units for training rather than the most suitable.

This, of course, was the reasoning that drove the Allies to select Friuli Division as the first combat group. In the contemporary operational environment, such a mistake will compromise the desired end state of raising competent, capable, and confident local security forces. If this were to happen, the second order effect will be the undermining of

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<sup>451</sup>HQDA, FM 3-07.1, 2-1.

<sup>452</sup>JCISFA, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, VI-1.

the legitimacy of the host nation due to its inability to tackle security issues efficiently without external support.

The second SFA imperative is to provide effective leadership. Leadership is a “critical aspect . . . especially important in the inherently dynamic and complex environments associated with SFA.”<sup>453</sup> This point is as true today as it was 70 years ago. Improving the quality of leadership requires a serious commitment and efforts that go beyond sterile training on weapons handling and tactical procedures. If the SFA force identifies a leadership shortcoming within the FSF, it should draft a detailed program to address it. To build confidence within the FSF, only NCOs and officers that have achieved leadership mastery should be placed in charge of units. In the meantime, enlistees must focus on basic and combat skills. When enlistees are proficient in the use of weapons and execution of basic tactics and NCOs and officers demonstrate leadership proficiency, the unit-level training may begin. Under these circumstances, the duration of the SFA process would increase, but would also increase the chance of raising credible, competent, capable, and confident FSF.

The management of information is the fourth of the SFA imperatives. This imperative “encompasses the collection, analysis, management, application, and preparation of information both from an information operations<sup>454</sup> perspective as well as

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<sup>453</sup>JCISFA, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, VI-2.

<sup>454</sup>“The integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.” Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operation* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 27 November 2012), GL-3.

in ways internal to the SFA operation.”<sup>455</sup> Within the information operations process, Public Affairs<sup>456</sup> is of particular relevance for SFA because it helps to make domestic and external public opinion aware of the U.S. commitment to the mission. Internal and external public opinion as well as the various political establishments must be cognizant of the complexity of SFA operations and that, in most cases, lasting results are achieved only through a long-term commitment.

If the public opinion and the political establishment push for a quick resolution of the U.S. military commitment despite evidence of organizational failures within the FSF, then the SFA force must make clear the potential failure of the SFA effort. In short, there must be a frank and honest dialogue between the SFA force and internal and external public opinion. Such a dialogue must include precise and clear information. In fact, misinformation or ignorance may create the expectation that the U.S. military can quickly address any FSF shortcomings through materiel factors alone. Furthermore, it may also raise expectations that the transition of responsibility for security will occur quickly. The obvious second order effect is that, when the expectation of a quick and effective transition of responsibility does not occur, the SFA effort may lose support and consensus.

This point is key for the fifth SFA imperative, ensuring unity of effort and purpose. As seen in the case of the ICA, the divergent views of the Americans and the

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<sup>455</sup>JCISFA, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, VI-2.

<sup>456</sup>“PA comprises public information, command information, and public engagement activities directed toward both the internal and external publics with interest in DOD. External publics include allies, neutrals, adversaries, and potential adversaries.” JCS, JP 3-13, II-7.

British about how to deal with a defeated Italy delayed a final decision on the commitment of Italian troops to the fight against the Germans. Even more relevant were disagreements within the British executive, where the Foreign Office was not willing to make any concessions and the military establishment, from July 1944 on, supported the idea of exploiting the Italian military support. If these disagreements had been solved as early as the signing of the short armistice on 8 September 1943, the Allies might have devoted an additional 11 months to the military assistance effort. In such an amount of time, it is fair to assume that most of the organizational failures of the inexperienced and untrained combat groups would have been addressed with a corresponding positive effect.

In contemporary SFA operations, achieving unity of purpose and effort in the early stage of operations is of paramount importance. Delaying the commitment of U.S. troops in SFA operations because of disputes among departments lowers the probability of success for the operation. Time is a critical factor for instilling combat effectiveness and maintaining consensus about the process. If such an important resource is wasted in discussions and altercations, the specter of an incomplete exit strategy for that operation looms. This was, for example, the case with the Vietnamization exit strategy during the Vietnam War.

In conclusion, the Allied experience in raising the ICA has implications for the current and future SFA operations. Policy makers and planners must achieve unity of purpose on how to deal with the FSF as early as possible in order to maximize efforts and save as much time as possible, the most important resource for SFA. Additionally, a frank, clear, and honest dialogue with the various public opinions and political

establishments will avoid the creation of a false expectation of a quick and effective exit. In fact, if FSF have to overcome major organizational issues, material factors are not the right response. Materiel alone cannot address organizational shortcomings, which require a much longer commitment of the SFA force in the host nation. Concurrently, a desire to transition responsibility for security to the FSF as soon as possible should not force SFA planners to select training units on a most-available basis. Instead, a detailed analysis of the total FSF available should reveal which organizations best suit the goals of the SFA process in terms of unit cohesion and quality leadership. Careful selection of the initial units would provide those less prepared with more time to overcome their deficiencies.

#### Further Research and Recommendations

This work is not intended to be the last word on the Italian combat groups during the Second World War. Other interesting aspects remain in order to capture the complexity of the process of instilling combat effectiveness in the ICA. The thesis analyzes only Friuli and Folgore Combat Groups, two extreme cases in terms of background and combat effectiveness. Further research on the Italian combat groups would provide more detail on the factors that impeded the process of instilling combat effectiveness in FSF.

What about, for example, Legnano Combat Group? The unit originated from Legnano Infantry Division, an ordinary division but one with substantial combat experience in Greece and Albania in 1941 and in Southern France in 1942. Was Legnano Combat Group able to achieve combat readiness during the five-month training program? Did Legnano Combat Group demonstrate combat effectiveness? What about Cremona Combat Group? In September 1943, Cremona Infantry Division deployed to Corsica with

Friuli Division and took part in local engagements against the German forces there.

While Friuli Division had a limited deployment in Yugoslavia in 1941, Cremona did not experience any other operational employment in the period 1939-1943. Did Cremona Combat Group achieve combat readiness? Could Cremona Combat Group be considered combat-effective?

If Legnano and Cremona were able to achieve combat readiness, what differentiated them from Friuli Combat Group? Which factor most impeded the achievement of combat effectiveness for Friuli Combat Group as compared to Legnano and Cremona Combat Groups? The identification of differentiating factors between these combat groups may generate new perspectives on contemporary “best practice” for SFA operations, thus providing for the maximization of efforts when the amount of time available is a concern.

SFA operations will remain a core competency for the U.S. Armed Forces for at least the next decade. Understanding SFA’s complexity and the factors affecting its outcome is essential for the design of a successful exit strategy as well as the building of legitimacy for the host nation. Therefore, continued analysis of Allied military assistance to the ICA in 1943 should reveal additional findings that could prove instrumental in reducing the threshold of failure inherent in any SFA operation.

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